

THE LASSES OF LEVERHOUSE

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THE
LASSES OF LEVERHOUSE

A Story

BY

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ETC. ETC.

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NOTE

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JESSIE FOTHERGILL.

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THE LASSES OF LEVERHOUSE

CHAPTER I

FOUR miles from the town of Bolton, in Lancashire, lay, amongst the roughest moors, and separated from all other places as if it had been a little world in itself, the village of Hamerton. In this village, in the house called Leverhouse, I, Betty Howarth, was born; in the old church of St. Chad's, in the valley below, I was christened by that unvarnished, unmendable, unalterable name, which used to cause me so much trouble; for 'Betty' cannot be called an elegant or even a pretty name.

How am I to introduce myself and my family? Ought I to begin—'The Howarths were an ancient race, residing in their old family mansion of Leverhouse, in the village of Hamerton, in Lancashire?'

Perhaps that might be the best way, and I might then go on to relate, decently and in order, my father's name, and the name of my mother, with the names and ages of all my brothers and sisters, in due rotation.

At least, we, the Howarths of Leverhouse, did live at Hamerton, in Lancashire; our family had lived for generations there, and was as ancient as any in the county—so our father used to tell us, till we began to think it was too old to be of much use, for we were shabby and poverty-stricken, and there were many of us.

First came Alizon and Deborah, the two eldest, both of the family and of those 'lasses' whose story I am about to tell. Then came Saxon, then myself, Betty, then Robin, then Johnny, and after him, Bobby; the list being closed with the two youngest girls, Fanny and Clara.

Leverhouse, where we lived, was an old, gray stone house, which stood on a height, removed by some fields and a lane from the public road over Blackrigg Moor; a house which had once stood alone and unapproached, dignified and secluded, until mills in the valley below, and houses not very far away, had congregated and shorn it of much of its ancient prestige. Our mother always told us that it had been the residence of the Howarth family for hundreds of years, and I, looking ruefully round upon the old furniture, the faded hangings, the tarnished gilding and dingy decorations, felt that her words bore the sound of truth in them.

Hamerton itself—'the village,' as we always called it, from habit and association—was not really much of a village. It had been a real village once, until that great monarch, King Cotton, came to reign there, and brought in with him his court and train of attendants, in the shape of factories, long chimneys, much thick smoke, and crowds of busy factory hands, whose clogged feet clattered periodically along the street, and whose gay handkerchiefs in summer and gray woollen shawls in winter, were associated in my mind with my very earliest memories, as were also the roar of looms and the rush of spindles, the distant cloud of smoke which we could see from our front windows, and which, when a child, I used to think was an actual cloud, but which my sister Alizon one day told me was Bolton. For a long time I always thought of Bolton as a city somehow built in the air, and with a murky cloud floating round it, until hard reality showed it to me as a very dirty town, into which we could penetrate either on foot or by means of trains or carriages.

I think I must have been about six years old when I was thus disillusioned, and I remember it still—the feeling of wonder and disappointment.

We were advancing in Hamerton. There were co-operative stores and a co-operative factory there, the latter known generally as ‘th’ co-op.’ Hamerton was, in fact, a prosperous little town, such as may often be met with throughout the manufacturing districts of Lancashire. It was not small enough to be utterly insignificant, nor too large for a great deal of gossip, curiosity, and scandal to be circulated amongst its inhabitants, and for people in general to know a great deal, or think they know a great deal, about their neighbour’s affairs, which supposed information occasionally led to unpleasantness. In fact, there were people unkind enough to say that Hamerton was a ‘gossiping hole.’ There may have been truth in the assertion; looking back with the light of my present experiences, I am inclined to think there was; but then, when I was a girl of sixteen, and my eldest sister Alison was only twenty, we knew very little of the gossip of Hamerton. Our only intimates were Sydney Bamford and her brother. Alison and Deb were the only ones of us who ever went to ‘parties’—such parties as Hamerton boasted; we were too poor to entertain visitors ourselves. Certain dim rumours I had heard, certain vague conjectures I had made, concerning different individuals whom I knew by sight or name, but up till now all had been rumour and conjecture. Not until I was sixteen did I have a glimpse, even, into the affairs of ‘grown up’ persons, and when I took that glimpse I hardly knew what I was doing; certainly I knew not what I should see and hear in the future.

CHAPTER II

ONE June afternoon we were in the schoolroom at our lessons, Alizon being, as usual, our instructress, for to her charge was committed our intellectual progress, while Deb, who was supposed to be less clever, did the house-keeping.

At the particular moment I speak of, Alizon was darning stockings; a goodly pile of them lay upon a little round table before her, and another goodly pile, neatly folded and finished, showed how much her industry had already accomplished.

For some quarter-of-an-hour past I had observed, whenever I looked up, that Alizon's face wore anything but a cheerful expression. Perhaps I noticed this the more, as it was usually so bright a face, and handsome always.

Before me, on the table, lay that exciting work, 'Picciola,' from which I should be reading to myself, with a view to rendering the same in English in the space of five minutes, when Alizon shall call upon me. But instead of attending to my lesson my eyes kept roving to my sister's face; my surmises and meditations related more to the 'Expressions of the Emotions in Men and Animals' than to the brilliant botanical and philosophic remarks in 'Picciola.' My thoughts ran somewhat after this fashion—

'What can make Alizon frown in that way? I'm sure we have been very quiet this afternoon. Johnny is as good as gold—though I don't quite like his look;

no good generally comes of his being so quiet. Have Alizon and Deb had a quarrel? Deb does say rather nasty things sometimes. Still—really she is biting her lips and going quite red! What can she be thinking of? And what makes her shake her head in that ridiculous way?’

Then, as a deeper shade came over my sister’s visage, ‘Is Alizon unhappy about something?’

Thought seemed almost to stand still for the contemplation of this possibility, but soon I resumed my intent, though stealthy, watch over Alizon’s countenance. I racked my brains to find some more likely cause for her gloom than that she could be really unhappy, for we rather prided ourselves upon being a very happy family. At last a bright comforting idea revealed itself. I thought, joyfully—

‘Ah, she has had bad news this morning! That fourteenpence that she lent Robin on Monday—he said in his letter that he wouldn’t be able to pay it back for a long time, if ever, unless she would take a halfpenny a fortnight till he had paid it off in that way. That accounts for it.’

Much relieved, I flourished over the leaves of my French dictionary, in search of the verb *falloir*.

At that juncture, Johnny, in search of mischief, volunteered to assist Clara by reading out from her arithmetic the next sum that she had to grapple with. She yielded up the book to him, and I, my errant attention diverted from Alizon, found leisure to listen.

‘Number eighty-three,’ he observed. ‘Now, then, simple proportion. “If four quarts of milk cost eightpence, how many men would it take to do the same piece of work in three days?”’

Clara proceeded to unravel this problem on her slate, and ere long arrived at the conclusion that Dr. Colenso, when he devised it, must have been inspired from below.

The little disturbance had aroused Alizon; she looked

up, and her eye fell upon me. Glancing at the large old silver watch which, standing on the mantelshelf, did duty as a timepiece, she said—

‘Now, Betty, the time is up. Bring your translation.’

Reluctantly lingering, I went, and Alizon, to make up for her previous inattention, became all at once very strict and very exacting. My translation was a failure; I was sent back to my seat with the curt remark, ‘Never heard anything worse.’

The ‘timepiece’ fingers pointed to half-past four; so Alizon remarked, pausing, with a stocking on one hand and a needle newly threaded in the other—

‘Johnny, remember to do your lessons for to-morrow. Clara, don’t forget the exercise I gave you. Fanny, do me three sums for to-morrow morning, and all of you have sharp points to your pencils. Twenty lines to any one whose pencil squeaks on the slate. Now you may go, except Betty; she must—’

Further information followed, but, although I guessed it, I heard nothing in the tumult made by my fellow-scholars in the joy of their release. In two minutes the hurricane was over; rattle rattle, bang bang, pell-mell, they scurried away upstairs, and then a few distant whoops informed me that the ‘brave and free’ had taken themselves and their liberty into the garden.

Alizon looked at me, and from her expression I knew she thought me idleness personified. She proceeded to carry the small table to the window recess; thither she took her chair, and there she subsided and darned diligently.

I likewise moved; I took her vacated place, whence I could see her frank, fair face, and through the window the landscape beyond. Soon she had completely forgotten me, as completely as I had forgotten ‘Picciola,’ which is saying a good deal, and I was free to watch her again. From her position she could see nearly the whole of Hamerton and its outskirts, for Leverhouse

was built on a hill, and overlooked the vale facing the opposite heights.

It was not a beautiful nor a fertile land that she saw ; chiefly barren moors and fields, sparsely furnished with herbage. Opposite, indeed, was a hill clothed with trees—we at Hamerton considered them very fine trees—and on the side of that hill, peeping from among the trees, was a white, picturesque-looking house. It was Fosshouse, where our two friends, Ralph and Sydney Bamford, lived. Upon that house Alizon's eyes paused, and there they remained steadily. Her face grew cold and set, and her lips pressed down one upon the other ; to my mind I had never seen her look so ill-tempered and unpleasant. I was deeply wondering what could be the reason of her gravity, and my happy fourteen-pence theory was shaking to its foundations, when suddenly Alizon's face flushed, and she drew back a little from the window. All my curiosity and determination—and I was well supplied with both—rose to my assistance. I heard approaching footsteps in the lane that ran just under the open schoolroom window, and I would—yes, I would see who it was, what it was, and why Alizon was blushing. Noiselessly I poised myself on tiptoe, and placing my hands on the table, I leaned forward as far as ever my length and elasticity would allow. Ah ! reward of merit ! As the owner of the footsteps passed the window, and as Alizon shrank a little farther back, so that the passor-by could not see her if he looked in, I was compensated by the vision of a man's head and shoulders. I saw no more ; he passed rapidly and did not look in. His face was turned towards the sloping field at the foot of the hill on which our house stood, but I knew who he was, and letting myself down as stealthily as I had risen up, I remarked to myself, 'I thought so.'

My curiosity being satisfied, my mind turned again to the neglected 'Picciola.' I heard a distant clock strike five, and I contemplated the fact that in an

hour tea would certainly be ready, whether I were or not.

'Come, Betty, bring the book, and I'll help you,' said Alizon, suddenly, throwing down the half-darned stocking as if it burnt her.

Armed with book and dictionary, I repaired to her side. '*Picciola femme, et Picciola fleur*,' I began, and soon the task was done.

'Would you like to come for a walk after tea, Betty?'

'Oh, yes; where?'

'On the Blackrigg Road.'

'Very much,' I assented, but added, after a pause, 'Didn't some one say that Ralph was coming?'

'What if he is? There will be quite enough people to entertain him without us. Anyhow, whether he comes or not, I'm going for a walk, and you may go with me if you like.'

'Of course I like,' I replied, as I bundled away '*Picciola*' and the dictionary, and, with a sense of freedom, made for the door.

'Then it's agreed?' came after me in the distance.

'Yes; "no backswaps," as Johnny says,' I shouted back again, and we did not meet again till tea-time.

CHAPTER III

SIX o'clock was the hour at which we all assembled for tea. The board was spread with numerous plates of thick bread and butter, but at the upper end were two plates of thin, with a dish of preserve, for those favoured beings, our father, mother, Alizon, Deb, and Saxon, when at home.

This evening Deb, as usual, presided over the army of cups and saucers and mugs; over the weak tea and strong milk.

My sister Deborah was not usually considered handsome—few even accorded her the faint praise of 'good-looking.' She was tall, and largely formed; her hands were large, her feet, too, were a good size; her shoulders broad and her hair red. She had strong, firm features, and was a silent, taciturn person. None of us thought her clever; but we were all agreed that Alizon had the neatest hand, the lightest foot, the brightest eyes and the quickest head in Hamerton.

I carefully avoided the topic of the walk, from an instinct that Alizon did not wish anything to be said about it. I therefore devoured my thick bread and butter with the indiscriminating greed of healthy sixteen, and furtively glanced at the open book on my knee. It was *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and, finding that I was coming to one of the pathetic parts, I abstained from reading more at present, lest tears—my tears were proverbially ready—should overflow my eyes and make

me appear unto men a fool, or lead to the discovery of my forbidden indulgence.

Not much conversation ever took place at our tea-table; our mother's cold face and majestic silence were not conducive to sociability, and our father seldom or never spoke. He was mild and gentle, short-sighted, mentally and physically. We were fond of him, but did not think much of his wisdom or discernment.

As soon as tea was over, Alizon made a sign to me, and we went upstairs to array ourselves for our excursion; not that we needed much adornment for our quiet moorland roads, where, if we met any one we knew, the thing was talked of for a week afterwards. We possessed ourselves each of a substantial straw hat, broad of brim and scant of trimming; we likewise armed ourselves with a sunshade apiece. 'Not that we shall need them,' said Alizon, 'but because we might meet cows, you know.'

'Now,' she observed, when we were ready, 'let us go down by the back stairs, or mother will see us and stop us.'

I knew her unspoken reason for this sneaking behaviour perfectly well, and I complied. We rattled down the carpetless back stairs, encountered Deb, informed her where we were going, and finally effected our escape.

A very few minutes, and we had left our narrow lane and were out upon the moorland road. The air was the air of a perfect June evening; need anything more be said? From the moors, however, it came keenly; it braced in the midst of its balm.

According to Alizon's programme, we had a long walk before us. I suggested that it would take fully an hour to attain the summit of the long ridge we were climbing, and then we should require a little rest, and then we should have to walk home again. But Alizon said tranquilly that we had 'day's long light before us,' and so quenched me.

The sunshades were needless; we met no horned cattle, but on the dark moors we discerned many sheep, black, like the grass they browsed on, and both blacknesses resulted from smoke. The earth might be sooty, but the sky was serenely cloudless, and on this calm height we breathed a fresher and purer air than that in the valley below.

'How lovely it is!' we brilliantly exclaimed at intervals. It was so still, so lone, so peaceful. Everything was softened behind the delicious haze wherewith the universe was veiled. Before us rose the wall of Blackrigg. My opinion—a prejudiced one I know—is that no contrast of colour can be more beautiful than that caused by the rich, mellow brown of a moor, against the pure, cold blue of a clear evening sky.

The ascent was long and somewhat steep, but the road was good, and we also came upon a friendly trough, into which limpid water flowed from a little stone pipe; we caught some in our hands, drank it, and went on our way refreshed.

'Alizon,' said I, after a long silence, 'do you mean to give us any holiday this summer?'

'Oh, I suppose so, some time.'

'Because you must be very fond of teaching; you never seem to want to leave off.'

'No, I hate it,' said she, composedly.

'How can you go on doing it, then?'

'I shall only go on doing it until Johnny has gone to school, and you can take the others, Betty. Then I shall go out and seek my fortune.'

'Oh, will you, Alizon? How?'

'I really don't know. Not as a governess if I can help. I shall do as Mr. Micawber did—trust that something will turn up.'

'In about how long do you think I can teach the others?' I asked bashfully.

'You are sixteen; in a year or so, I daresay.'

'In a year or so you will be twenty-one, and I

shall be seventeen,' I remarked, with my usual originality.

'That is obvious.'

'Twenty-one! Perhaps, Alizon, you will not need to seek your fortune, then. People sometimes get married. Mother was only eighteen when she was married!'

'Fiddlesticks! I shall not be married. Talk about what you understand.'

I was snubbed, but not crushed. 'I don't see why you should be so very certain about it,' I replied, grumblingly.

'I should like to see the world a little, first,' said Alizon, modestly. We always considered her a venturesome and ambitious person.

'Oh, and you think that by seeking your fortune you will see the world?' I reflected. By that time we were on the top of the ridge, and were ready to rest.

'Before we go down again,' said Alizon, 'we will go and have a look at the reservoir: it is only a few steps farther.'

I assented, and stretched myself out upon the heather, asking presently, 'Alizon, why didn't we come here by that short cut that we know of? It would have taken us little more than half the time.'

'I know that, but I did not want to be a short time; my object was to stay out as long as possible.'

'Ah! I see,' said I, giving utterance to my uppermost thought; 'so that Ralph would be tired out, and go away before we got back.'

'Such was my intention.'

'Come!' said I, rising, 'The sun is quite low. If we are going to see the lodge we must go now; it will be nearly dark by we get home.'

Alizon answered by rising, and we plunged into the heather at the left side of the road and took our way to where the flat line of an embankment rose from the moor. In a few moments we were resting our elbows

on the top of the wall, and looking at the reservoir. It was perhaps a mile long and half-a-mile broad. Nothing could well be more bleak, wild, and desolate than the scene we looked upon now. The moors here were flat; they stretched, almost without an undulation, all round the dreary piece of water, till in the distance they dipped and sloped downwards. Afar off we saw other moors as high as this we stood upon—they stood out softly clear in the crystal air, and their summits seemed to me to be like voices in the silence. I said something to that effect to Alizon, and she replied, 'My dear Betty, your ideas are sometimes too fantastic. Let us go home.'

She turned, but I could not forbear lingering a few minutes to take a last loving look at the dark water, and to watch the whispering, lapping, stealthy way in which it crept up to the embankment, kissed the cold stone, and retired again, and I thought of Sir Bedivere in the *Morte d'Arthur*. 'I see nothing,' said Sir Bedivere, 'but the waves wap, and the waters wan.' I could have stayed dreaming for an hour over that very scene. I began to think that soon I should see the flash of the jewels in Excalibur's hilt, and the arm 'clothed all in white samite' that rose from the lake, and grasped the blade, shaking it mightily three times. Was it up such a lake as this that the barge came sailing with the weeping queens within? I suddenly came to myself, and ran down the slope to the road. Alizon was before me. Was it Alizon? Yes, and there was some one with her. He appeared to have just joined her. I looked at him earnestly, and laughed to myself when I recognised Ralph Bamford. He must have come by that short cut about which Alizon and I were even now speaking.

'How Alizon is fuming, and thinking how stupid she was to tell Deb where we were going!' thought I.

I then composed my engaging features to a decent gravity, and marched after my sister and her companion.

When I overtook them, I found, as I expected, that Alizon's expression was anything but complacent. I gave a furtive glance at her, when I had shaken hands with Ralph, and I met her eye. We were both gifted with a keen sense of the ludicrous, and when Alizon saw the hypocritical gravity of my countenance she laughed aloud, and I did the same.

'What is the matter?' demanded Mr. Bamford, in an unappreciative tone.

'Oh! nothing. Betty and I have been having a —joke, that was all.'

'You see, I called at Leverhouse,' he went on, in an elaborately explanatory manner, 'and I found that Deborah was very busy, and Mr. Howarth was asleep, and Mrs. Howarth engaged——' Here Alizon pinched me, which action I interpreted to mean, 'What a transparent piece of nonsense!' 'So I asked which way you had gone, and Mrs. Howarth was good enough to say that she would be much less uneasy if I would go and meet you, as you had been out so very long.'

'Mother is very timid about such things,' said Alizon; 'and there is no need for it. We are not like Miss Woodhouse, in *Emma*, who had once walked half-a-mile alone, but thought it so dangerous that she never attempted it again.'

Mr. Bamford only laughed an easy kind of laugh, looked aside at Alizon, and said, 'Ah, but it is getting dark, and this is a lonely road.'

'If it is lonely we are the less likely to be molested, or to meet unpleasant persons.'

I felt this to be ungracious, and I saw Ralph's face flush a little. For my own part, I liked Ralph well enough. He was a trifle commonplace, perhaps, and inclined to be always saying, 'Ah—yes,' with much emphasis, even where no emphasis was required. I had sometimes said to Alizon that a young man who had travelled so much as Ralph Bamford might talk about other than purely local topics, and that I wished

he had something more to say about his journeys, when asked, than 'Yes' and 'No.' Alizon was wont to agree with me, adding, 'Ralph's conversation is orthodox, though—"yea, yea, and nay, nay," being generally the extent of his remarks.'

He was good-natured; of that I had no manner of doubt, though, in my happy young impudence, I had despised his intellect thoroughly ever since, on my asking him one day in a voice of rapture, if he did not think *The Excursion* exquisite, he demanded which excursion I meant? Was it a Bolton affair? He had not heard of any picnics lately.

His genial good humour was checked by Alizon's snubs. I stole a look at him, and saw how much longer his kind, brown face had grown. Alizon maintained a majestic silence, but I, being sixteen, and having no dignity to keep up, asked—

'How is Sydney? Has she come from town yet?'

'She came yesterday. You will have her up to see you soon. She wants to see Alizon and Deborah. She——'

'Please don't talk about "Deborah." It is too wonderful to hear you. You might as well say "Debōrah" at once; I believe it is more correct Hebrew.'

Again cut short in his endeavours at politeness, Ralph became silent, and at that moment we turned a bend in the road, and found ourselves face to face with a couple strolling leisurely up the hill.

A tall man and a very handsome girl, who looked about Alizon's age, but was, as I saw at a glance, far more regularly beautiful than my sister. The pair were apparently engaged in a very amicable conversation, for as we met them I saw a smile hovering on the girl's face, and as her companion raised his dark eyes to view our group, I heard the echo of a low, amused laugh.

He looked at us all, beginning with Alizon and

ending with me. His eyes then returned to Alizon, and he lifted his hat bowing, as I could not help thinking, with more grace than is usual to the provincial Englishman. Ralph and he exchanged a good-evening, and then each group passed on.

‘Fine fellow, Entwistle!’ said Ralph.

‘Do you think so?’ retorted Alizon, with a slight shrug.

‘Yes. He is about the only man in the parish worth knowing; but then, to be sure, he is so superior that one can forgive the others for being so stupid.’

This I felt to be a long and profound speech for Ralph. It made a deep impression upon me, and I was too extremely anxious, for reasons of my own, to gain any information respecting Mr. Entwistle.

‘He is only a cotton-spinner,’ said Alizon at length, sneering, but not heartily.

‘“Only a cotton-spinner!” What else need he be? He is a gentleman. You cannot know him, Alizon, or you would not depreciate him so.’

‘I know very little of him, and wish for no further acquaintance.’

‘Sydney thinks no end of him. She says he is one of the most perfect gentlemen in heart and mind——’

‘Oh, Heavens! Spare me! What a dreadful character! I daresay he is what the “Competition-Wallah” calls “grossly proper”; for my part, I have always thought him, when I did meet him, priggish to a degree, and most officiously dictatorial.’

‘I am sorry I cannot agree with you.’

‘The fact is,’ went on Alizon, with a certain bitter pleasure in her voice, ‘he came far too soon into the money which his papa had accumulated. He thinks that money rules everything. I believe he would rather see a cotton mill than the finest cathedral ever built, and would think the buzz of a thousand looms and spindles sweeter than an oratorio.’

‘You are quite mistaken,’ said Ralph. ‘I never

met any man who made less parade of his wealth; he never voluntarily talks shop, and as for cathedrals and picture galleries and—and—that kind of thing—I only wish I knew as much about them.'

What was my surprise to see Alizon turn to Ralph, with a tranquil face and a laugh in her gray eyes, saying, 'I am sure if I had known you took the subject so much to heart I would never have spoken. I am not going to quarrel with you about Mr. Entwistle. He is not worth it—unless you wish us to have a battle?'

'Oh, Alizon, you know that nothing could grieve me more. I am sure I beg your pardon if I have been rude.'

'When people will have heroes, judiciously chosen or not, they are apt to be a little testy about them. However, as talking of Mr. Entwistle seems to have rather a feverish effect upon us, let us say no more about him.'

By the look Ralph gave her, I knew he believed she was anxious to avoid quarrelling with him, and I knew, too, that he was mistaken.

All wrinkles, however, were soon smoothed away. We at once dashed aside from the topic labelled 'Entwistle, dangerous and explosive,' and turned to that mild subject, the approaching school treat, discussed the latest form of the deadly feud raging between the two village factions, which Alizon had dubbed the 'Jesuit-in-disguise,' and the 'No-Popery,' and so on.

When we came to the lane leading to our house, Alizon cordially invited Ralph to come in. He, however, seeming to think his mission accomplished, declined, and we went home alone.

CHAPTER IV

AFTERNOON again ; lessons again ; wandering attention again—upon my part, at any rate. On this occasion my head was running upon poetry. The poet who sallied forth in the night, with ‘sweet rhymes ringing through his head,’ could not have been more tyrannised over by these said rhymes than I was by any poem, or scrap of a poem, which had once fairly taken possession of my mind. It was one of my faults—one well known in the family—this aptitude of mind for forgetting practical things in poetry ; many and candid were the comments of my brethren upon my proclivity. Constant was the blame dinned into my deprecating ears, upon this topic. I say my deprecating ears, for I knew my failing—I knew too, how wrong and immoral it was in me to yield to it, and to allow my thoughts to be running—on that particular afternoon—upon the sweet but very useless verses—

‘Bonny Kilmeny rode up the glen,
But ’twasna to meet Duneira’s men,’ etc.,

which adapted themselves in my brain to a lively hymn-tune, rather than upon geography, grammar, and history.

Before me lay a little work entitled *Analysis of English History*. It was full of dates, and the more important events led off in larger and blacker type than the rest—a cunning device to entrap, as it were, the attention of the student, which failed lamentably in my case. I could see through the open windows the wood

all around Fosshouse ; there was a rustling breeze that played in and out and round about, and distracted me. I was thinking how delicious it would be to be then, at that moment, upon a wide, brown moor, outstretched upon the springy heather, gazing up into that translucent blue and fleecy white, and with not a living creature near but my chief 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' our Skye terrier Sting.

'Betty, is that lesson ready ? If not you must put it away till play-hours.'

I started as if I had been galvanised. Alas, for my dream ! Alas, for the present !

'I will really try, Alizon ; I don't quite know it yet.'

My soft answer turned away her wrath, and she replied, 'Well, I know I am weakly indulgent, but you may have one other chance.'

Here Deb entered upon the scene.

'Alizon, Sydney Bamford is here, and I am busy and mother is out. You must go to her.'

'Is she alone ?'

'I think there is a boy or some one with her. At any rate I cannot go, so you must. You are quite tidy—go !'

'Betty, come with me. Johnny, give me your word not to be larking while I am away.'

'Word !' said Johnny, concisely, and Alizon knew he was safe.

'Betty is not fit,' began Deb, but Alizon whirled me away with her ; we dashed across the hall to the drawing-room, and I entered, in the full consciousness of tumbled hair, inky fingers, a gown that had seen better days—as part of the wardrobe of my elders—thick boots in which I had walked out early in the morning, and from which I had effectually eradicated the polish by wading through the long hay grass in the meadow.

'She was a phantom of delight,
When first she gleamed upon my sight,'

I murmured to myself, with reference to my own charms of person and attire.

'Sydney Iedgard-Bamford' was the autocrat of the younger portion of our family. From her verdict there was little or no appeal; I always went into her presence with awe, I always came out of it with a certain sense of relief. And yet she was as generous, kind-hearted, and motherly a creature as ever stepped. My chronic awe of her was, that afternoon, augmented when I beheld the magnificence of her attire. As every article of her raiment was quite unlike anything I had ever seen before, and as many parts of it appeared to me utterly without assignable or conceivable *raison d'être*, I at once concluded that she was dressed in the very height of fashion, and I perceived the reason of her unwonted splendour in the shape of a card-case which she held in her hand. She had evidently been making state calls, and took us on her way home.

'My dear Alizon, how are you?'—Kiss—'So glad to see you! You always look so fresh and unjaded. Betty, you are ever a welcome sight to me, you dear untidy thing.'

At this I blushed and wriggled, with the ingenuous awkwardness of extreme youth and diffidence, and Sydney proceeded—

'Alizon, let me introduce a friend of mine—Martin Lancaster; Martin—Miss Howarth, Miss Betty Howarth.'

That name! What would he think of it? At that trying moment I did wish, in my desperation, that I had consented to appear as 'Bettina,' at least when I am introduced to people. I must think seriously about it.

Finding that Martin Lancaster did not appear very much overcome with the sound of my name, I now eyed him over. There was comfort for me in his appearance at any rate. He was plain, though he had a well-sounding name; he looked awkward and clumsy, though

he was Sydney Bamford's guest. I instantly felt a sisterly regard for him, for I, too, had a habit of feeling as if I were one vast, obtrusive, and hideous pair of elbows; he looked shy, and 'a fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind.' My courage rose. I left the chair over which in my haste and confusion I had stumbled, and upon which I afterwards sat down, and took another nearer to him. We were in the window. I always, by instinct, chose the window when thrown amongst strangers, either at home or abroad; whether with a latent idea that I could if necessary escape by it, or because I could turn away my eyes and look out upon the landscape or street when shyness overcame me—which it often did, overwhelming me, as a strong man armed spoils his enemy—I can hardly say, but I rather think, from a mixture of both feelings.

Sydney was talking very rapidly and emphatically to Alizon, and as I could hear distinctly what she said, and wished to know why she had come, I suspended my intended remarks to Martin Lancaster, and listened.

'Alizon, next week I am having a great undertaking—what our grandmothers would have called a "scheme," to the top of Blackrigg—a picnic in the morning and a dance in the evening, and I want you to promise to come, will you? It is next Thursday. Of course, I mean Deb as well, and Betty too if she will come.'

Betty! I sat numb with horror. To face fifty people—some of them—most of them—strangers! Surely Alizon will not be so utterly devoid of sisterly feeling as to say yes!

'Oh, thanks,' replied my sister. 'Thursday—I'm sorry Deb has an engagement next Thursday, and Betty—you see Betty is not out yet.'

"Out"! My dear Alizon, this "scheme" is for all ages, sizes, and capacities, from infants in arms to octogenarians. I ask them all, because I want to please every one, and I know that the very young and the very

old will not come. Yes, decidedly—if Deb cannot come, Betty shall. So it is settled, Betty.’

Despair goaded me to action. My deeply-rooted aversion to the society of my fellow-beings, when dressed in their war-paint and feathers and assembled for a social skirmish—this lent me courage. I hurried out without any compunction, ‘Thanks, I’m much obliged, but I’m afraid I can’t come.’

Alizon looked me down, and, smiling pityingly, remarked that she would ask mother; upon which Sydney expressed a hope that if Saxon were at home on Thursday evening he would come too. Finding that my doom was settled, I obeyed the poet’s advice—

‘Espouse thy fate at once, and cleave
To fortitude without reprieve,’

and I turned to my neighbour, saying, ‘I suppose you are staying at Fosshouse?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘London.’

‘London! You live there? How glorious!’

‘I am sure you never can have been there,’ he answered, in a far from enthusiastic tone.

‘No,’ said I humbly, I have not, but some day I hope I shall.’

‘Why, what would you do if you got there?’

‘Oh, I should go to Westminster Abbey, and the Tower, and all the old places. I long to see them.’

I ceased, and he regarded me with mingled curiosity and contempt. I now for the first time noticed his face closely and critically. My first impression was that it was an ugly face; sallow and thin; and my indiscriminating mind condemned at once the overhanging brow and large mouth. I learnt afterwards to recognise the beauty—despite the many faults which marred my liking for him—of both; and even then, with my innate love of what was lovely, I passed by the ob-

jectionable brow and mouth as quickly as I could, and found consolation in Martin's eyes, which, I must confess, were the most beautiful I ever saw. They were rather deeply sunk, very dark brown in hue, and not restless. Black, thick eyebrows, and a delicate, rather aquiline nose, completed this strange, incongruous face, some features of which would have been particularly fine and slight in the slightest girl's face, while others were massive enough to belong to a full-grown man. I wondered how old he could be—this boy.

Now that I had spoken to him and gazed at him, I found that he was not shy; but, to my own profound astonishment, neither was I. He attracted me; I determined at once to learn something more about him.

'You dislike London, then?' said L. 'In which part of it do you live? And have you any brothers or sisters?'

'We live in the East of London—in the thick of the town; my father is a clergyman—I have dozens of brothers and sisters, and we are very poor.' The last words were said with a kind of defiant doggedness.

'So are we,' I answered, promptly. 'That is the most remarkable thing about us—our number and our poverty—so Alizon says. Do you like Hamerton?' I added, for I remembered—too late, of course, as was always the case with me—that it is rude to ask a stranger minute questions concerning his family and affairs.

'I should think so,' he answered. 'I never was in the country before—never, in all my life. Walls and windows and streets and—— this is what I have dreamed of, and only dreamed of.'

I drew nearer, with wide-open eyes, and curiosity in a literally burning state. Secretly, I considered Hamerton the most perfect place, for climate and scenery, upon the whole surface of this 'spotted ball,' but I had been jeered down so often for airing such a notion that I had at last unwittingly learnt to keep it to myself.

Here, however, it seemed, was another person bitten with the same infatuation. I determined to improve the occasion.

‘Have you been out upon the moors yet?’

‘No; I only came the day before yesterday; I have spent most of my time in staring at the hills from the garden at Fosshouse.’

‘The garden at Fosshouse!’ I repeated, with a superior smile. ‘Wait till you have climbed to the top of Blackrigg and seen the lodge—Hoarbent Lodge——’

‘Lodge?’ he repeated, inquiringly.

‘A large sheet of water,’ I exclaimed, not liking to say ‘reservoir.’ Who know what London reservoirs were? Not I, for one.

‘Oh!’ I continued, edging still nearer, ‘sometimes it is so beautiful up there! It is so peaceful, so calm, and yet so sad. I have seen the sun set upon that water, and all the moors turn purple, and the sky crimson, and then they faded——’

I paused, remembering the *dicta* of one and all my family upon the subject—of ‘nonsense,’ ‘moonshine,’ *et cetera*, and I felt myself blushing violently as I decided that this stranger, whom I had been favouring with a specimen of my idiotic behaviour, would consider me either mad or imbecile, simply. I hoped that Alizon had not heard me.

Thus reflecting, I was fidgeting with the corner of the black alpaca monstrosity which I, who loathed and abominated it, denominated a save-all. My eyes were fixed upon some of the numerous dried-up spots on its under-side, which marked the occasions upon which it had been used as a pen-wiper, and my confusion was increasing every moment, when, ‘Go on,’ said an eager voice close to me, and I looked up. My new acquaintance was bending earnestly towards me in an attitude of the utmost attention. ‘Go on!’ he repeated; ‘tell me some more about it!’

‘I cannot,’ I answered, abruptly, determined not to

disgrace myself further; and yet, as he appeared to sympathise and understand, I added, with a recalling sigh, 'But it is so beautiful! It really is.'

'Ah! don't you find that always the way? As you are in the midst of trying to imagine or describe a beautiful thing, something happens—some one speaks to you—and it is all gone.'

This puzzled me; he described a sensation which I had frequently felt, and which I had always supposed to be both foolish and wrong.

Alizon was occupied entirely with Sydney; she did not hear me or notice me, and I thought that I might venture to reply to him.

'Yes, I know what you mean, but don't you think it is as well it should be so, because to go into raptures about things is silly—at least,'—for I saw an expression of extreme dissent upon his face—'my mother and sister say so. I am always wanting to read poetry, and I like to sit and dream sometimes; but they say it wastes time so—and it does, certainly—and that I should be doing something useful.'

'Poetry is useful,' he answered, quite angrily. 'Useful! I suppose that means sewing, and grubbing about the house, and making puddings, and doing all kinds of ugly, common things.' And he shuddered.

I was both horrified and pleased. Hitherto I had accepted without question the *formulae* of Alizon and Company, not because I liked them, but because I believed they embodied my duty in this state of life, and in my ignorant young mind, 'right' and 'duty' meant something—I knew not what—great, but cold, dreary and apart.

Habit is strong. I ventured to suggest that the ugly, common things were necessary; but our conversation was interrupted. Sydney rose, with a rattle and a clatter as of chains or manacles. I discovered the reason thereof in a *chatelaine* which dangled from her waist with some dozen or so of trifles suspended to it, all of

which appeared to have been chosen on the principle of unnatural selection—that is, they were one and all utterly and entirely useless. Nevertheless, the bauble pleased me, impressed me, awed me; no other Hamerton young woman owned such a thing.

‘Then I shall expect you on Thursday,’ said Sydney; ‘we meet at eleven, at Fosshouse.’ Then after a few more words, she and her guest, or *protégé*, or whatever he was, took their departure, and I turned with a groan to the arbitress of my immediate destiny.

‘Alizon, how could you be so unkind as to say I should go? Fancy me at a swell picnic—me!’

‘And why not? I don’t want to go in the least; I hate them. Where’s Deb? I must talk to her about our clothes; I don’t in the least know what to wear. A picnic is simple enough, but a picnic and a dance—oh, how I hate to be poor!’

She departed, but I dashed after her, calling out, ‘Our lessons, Alizon. Johuny and the others are all downstairs, waiting.’

‘Tell them they may go,’ she replied, turning to me a visage preoccupied with such vain themes as muslin, ribbons, velvets, etc. Feeling a glorious liberty dawning before me I rushed downstairs, proclaimed freedom to the assembled captives, and made haste to secrete myself, with a volume of Shakespeare, out of sight and call until tea-time.

In the evening our circle was enlarged by the arrival of Saxon, our eldest brother. It will easily be understood that the boys of our family did not belong to the *jeunesse dorée* of this rapid period, and that they had no time after leaving school to be young men either of leisure or pleasure. Saxon was a clerk in the District Bank at Bolton, the neighbouring town, and having very different views for himself, was wont to pour his grumblings into Deb’s sympathetic ear. On this occasion I too was present while he expounded his views. It seemed that the bank was ‘confoundedly slow.’ Nothing less than

a factory or two of his very own—at some future period—would content the chafing spirit of our brother.

‘A manufacturer,’ said I, reflectively; ‘that means something like Mr. Entwistle, I suppose?’

Saxon nodded. ‘Just that, Miss Bet; so now you know.’

‘How shocked Alizon would be if you told her,’ said I with much apparent simplicity. ‘She nearly quarrelled the other day with Ralph, because he stuck up for Mr. Entwistle, and Alizon said he was “only” a cotton-spinner.’

‘Alizon—cheeky young donkey—ignorant duffer—much she knows about it!’ mumbled Saxon, while Deb said, hastily and impatiently, ‘What has Mr. Entwistle to do with it?’

‘Oh, nothing. Just what Alizon said to Ralph—I’m not going to quarrel with you about him.’

Saxon shrugged his shoulders, Deb looked put out, and I, pleased to let her see that I was not blind, was obliging enough to walk away.

CHAPTER V

SUNDAY arrived—‘the day of rest,’ as it is called—a sad misnomer in my opinion. In Hamerton it was the busiest day in the week. The two Factions, with their various branches and subdivisions, met in church, and everybody’s eyes were sharper, their tongues tarter, their evil dispositions more robust and conspicuous, on that day than on any other. In the morning we all, except Robin, went to the Parish Church, took notes of our neighbours’ deportment and clothes, criticised the singing, and did everything but attend to the service. I may mention that our family, being delightfully broad in their views, did not hold either with the No-Popery Faction or with the Jesuit-in-Disguise one, but enjoyed many jokes and derived much delight from impartially ridiculing and satirising both. Robin, who had a good voice, exercised it twice a week in the choir at Bentfoot, a small church which acted as a Chapel of Ease to Hamerton, and which in the morning usually boasted a congregation of about six. Upon a fine Sunday afternoon, however, it was generally nearly half full, and upon this occasion a large body of us accompanied Robin. We proceeded across some fields, through Bentfoot Clough or Thrutch, and so up the narrow steps into the sloping churchyard, in the midst of which stood Bentfoot Church. It stood upon a moor, and was surrounded by moors on every side. There were now many graves in the churchyard, which two or three years ago had been empty.

We walked up the path, and the boys, with that ir-

reverence which only attains its full perfection in a boy, took shots at the upright crosses at the heads of some graves. Robin accurately hit the very middle of my favourite tombstone—one inscribed to ‘Sara Healey, Infelix.’ The discordantly-toned bell clanged out, and we heard the awful and wonderful grinding of the harmonium within, undergoing its bi-weekly torturing at the hands of the ‘intelligent working-man’ who was supposed to play it.

The church, when one did see the interior, was a bare-looking place. The windows were all clear, greenish-white glass, and the sun streamed in at the western one, whence, as from the others, you looked out upon nothing but dark brown ridges, and gray stone farms and cottages.

Robin repaired to the vestry, and we hastened with covetous eyes to secure to ourselves the uppermost available seats in the synagogue. There was no place for us to sit altogether, but as we never, under any circumstances, committed such an act, that did not matter. Alizon, with much presence of mind, marched up to the top of the church. She was a person who could do that kind of thing; she could even stand still and look deliberately round until she had decided which was the best seat, and then go up to it and take possession of it. I followed her, and we found ourselves in a bench occupied by one old woman. There was room for another person, no doubt, but why should we ostentatiously proclaim that fact? Alizon placed herself near the entrance, and I peered about in my short-sighted fashion to glean knowledge of my fellow-worshippers. I perceived, not far off, Sydney and Ralph Bamford, and Martin Lancaster.

How that harmonium did grind away, to be sure! It was very wonderful to hear it—more curious than beautiful, as some savage tribes of Central South America are said to be. The intelligent working-man looked very hot, and his expression suddenly became

fearfully excited. He madly pulled out a number of stops, and the instrument clashed out into the faint semblance of a triumphal march. It was Whitsunday, and the clergy had apparently thought it necessary to celebrate it with a Processional Hymn. The choristers came in singing 'Brightly gleams our banner,' and we all rose and began singing too. I heard, with voluptuous pleasure, the clear, fresh soprano of Alizon's voice ring out, true to a hair, when—

'My eye, Betty!' uttered a ghastly whisper behind me, and I turned, much startled, to discover Johnny in the next pew. From that moment I knew that my doom was sealed. 'Clean surplices,' he proceeded, in a loud voice, while I pretended not to know him, and watched for Robin's shock head and rosy face—when Alizon suddenly stopped singing, and gave me a little poke, as who would say, 'Friend, go higher.' I moved, and as I did so, openly craned forward to see who was the intruder that displaced us. Waiting to take his place beside Alizon was that source of—to me—much surmise and many reflections, Hugh Entwistle. He half smiled, and bowed courteously, as she made way for him, and then meeting my wide-open, saucer-like orbs fixed upon his face, the smile became more decided. It was infectious. I too smiled, thoughtfully conscious that Alizon was standing very straight and stiff—'drawn to the full height of her majestic figure' is, I believe, the technical expression—and had resumed her singing, reading every word from her book, as if she did not know the whole thing by heart.

In the bench before us I perceived the lady whom we had met the other night with Mr. Entwistle on Blackrigg. Very soon the gentleman began to sing too, and his voice and Alizon's went extremely well together, and made a pleasant duet, to which I gave my best attention. Alizon, however, did not appear to approve the arrangement, for she stopped after a

minute or two, and Mr. Entwistle was allowed to sing by himself—

‘Then with saints and angels
May we join above,
Offering prayer and praises,
At thy throne of love !
When the toil is over,
Then come rest and peace,
Jesus in His beauty,
Songs that never cease !’

All my life I had known Mr. Entwistle by name and by sight, but it had never yet been my fate to speak or be spoken to by him. Alizon occasionally mentioned him, always to abuse him. Deb, if asked, would say she really knew nothing about him, and Alizon would further add, ‘My dear child, they are very respectable people, I believe, but, as they say here, “shoddy”—nothing else.’—As we, the Howarths, were decidedly not new, in any form or shape, decidedly not prosperous, and in our own eyes decidedly not vulgar, I felt it a kind of obligation to look down upon Mr. Entwistle and his mother as something low and out of our line. But all the time I had a lurking certainty that the lowness existed only in my own imagination; certain faint signs and tokens had caused me to take a deep and rather a sudden interest in Mr. Entwistle and his proceedings. I spoke of him now and then to Deb, giving him the title of ‘Alizon’s Enemy,’ and watching her keenly the while, but, so far, my painstaking and industrious curiosity had remained its own reward. From where I sat this afternoon, I could see equally well Ralph Bamford and Hugh Entwistle, and in high glee at the delightful coincidence I gave my very best attention to both. I had never before had such an opportunity of comparing them. I did so now to my heart’s content, with an occasional glance thrown in at Alizon’s set face and tightened lips. My comparisons were not purely favourable to Ralph. His honest, good-looking,

but blunt form and face were, as I could not help thinking, inferior in attractiveness to Hugh Entwistle's taller, sparer, but more commanding traits. Ralph's hair was light brown, but it was of that hue which has less brightness than many darker shades. Mr. Entwistle's, on the contrary, was not only light—it was yellow—a most decided and indubitable yellow, and very bright indeed. I liked to see it catch the sunlight and reflect it, and remarked within myself, 'Mr. Entwistle's hair is bright by sympathy with the sunshine, but that dull glitter on Ralph's is the product of bear's grease or brilliantine, or whatever he uses in the shape of toilet requisites.' Ralph's face was broadish, and had whiskers as well as moustache, which fact added to its breadth, and was far from becoming. Mr. Entwistle's was not a hirsute visage; there was some hair on his upper lip, the rest of his face was as smooth as a marble profile, without looking in the least weak or effeminate. Effeminate? No; no one could say that he had a womanish face. It was thin, the nose was rather long, perhaps, the under lip projected very decidedly, and the eyebrows had a gift of drawing down and together very quickly—were less disposed than Ralph's to lift themselves in wonder, more disposed than his to contract in meditation, anger, or resolve. Finally, Ralph's eyes and eyebrows were of a lighter shade than the rest of his face; Mr. Entwistle's were darker; a most significant trait—to my mind. While assuring myself of these facts, and deciding that, low or not low, respectable or otherwise, Mr. Entwistle was a man more to my taste than Ralph Bamford, I was agreeably oblivious of my surroundings, until some one poked me from behind, and Johnny said, in a loud whisper—

'I say, Betty, the congregation think you are Lot's wife.'

I then discovered that the hymn, the opening sentences, and the exhortation were over, and that the rest of the congregation were bewailing their manifold

sins and transgressions on their knees, while I was standing in my original position with my hymn-book displayed open at 'Brightly gleams our banner.' Covered with shame and confusion I betook myself where I should have been long ago—to my knees, and desperately endeavoured to give my attention to the service, but without success. It was so much more interesting to watch my fellow-worms than to state aloud that I was a worm, and a sheep, and a sinner; and very soon I was observing Martin Lancaster, to the exclusion of all other interests, worldly or spiritual. On this occasion I forgot to rise from my knees at the proper time, and Johnny, delighted to find me so very good a subject, was ready with his poke and his blood-freezing whisper, and from that moment constituted himself my watch-dog, while Alizon turned to me and said in an angry whisper, 'For goodness' sake behave yourself! What are you thinking about?'

But at last sermon-time came, and I was free. My gaze went to Ralph, who liked not the hard and narrow bench upon which he sat; he twisted and turned—he heaved a sigh, deep and vast. Then he turned large and mournful eyes to Mr. Carston, dumbly entreating him to bring his discourse to a close. After exploring his hymn and prayer-books, without, apparently, finding much exciting reading therein, he at last had recourse to that friend in need, 'A Man may not marry his Grandmother,' which he perused diligently and steadily. Sydney maintained a calm repose. Her face was composed to that expression of placid semi-idiotcy peculiar to the orthodox Briton in the House of Prayer; her attention, her mind, her soul, were absorbed in the effort to appear as if she were thinking about nothing, feeling, hearing, seeing nothing. She succeeded very tolerably, but then she was a clever woman.

After a cursory glance at Martin Lancaster, I turned my attention to Mr. Entwistle's—what? Friend? relation? She was dark and handsome. She sat as

still or stiller than Sydney Bamford; her eyelids drooped—were they shut? Yes, and her head sank too; she slept, and then, rousing herself with a start, looked apprehensively round at her companion, who, very wide-awake, let a hymn-book fall, and then plunged down, and was a long time in picking it up, though even when he rose there was a remnant of a smile about his lips.

A loud snore behind warned me that my vigilant guardian had allowed the slumber of the just to overtake him. I, intensely delighted, and seeing that his snore was attracting the notice of the whole congregation, ducked down my head to conceal my laughter. Alizon gave me an angry nudge, and muttered something, frowning. Hugh turned, took a good look at Johnny, and openly smiled. The young lady was smiling, too; we were all smiling when Mr. Carston, struck apparently with our ill behaviour, paused—a long, awful pause. Johnny gave one tremendous snore; Alizon's face became a lively scarlet, I was nearly stifled in my efforts not to laugh, and Mr. Entwistle became suddenly absorbed in the Epistle for Saint Bartholomew's Day. At last, however, the service was over, and we streamed out. In the churchyard Sydney Bamford was talking to Hugh Entwistle and his companion. Ralph came forward as Alizon and I, waiting for Deb, walked slowly down. As we passed, Sydney called eagerly for us to stop, and we did so, I willingly, Alizon reluctantly. Looking casually at her, I saw that she looked pale, weary, and indifferent. Hugh Entwistle bowed deeply and ceremoniously to her, and addressed to her some trifling remark, which she answered in so languid and inattentive a manner that my wonder was aroused. As Sydney turned to Alizon, Mr. Entwistle said, raising his hat with a general inclination, 'Good afternoon,' and then turning to his companion, 'Let me carry your books, Hectorina.'

'Yes, Hugh,' said she, gathering up her trailing

muslins around her. How poor and small—how limp and washed out—did the garments of Alizon and myself appear when compared with those of Sydney Bamford and Hectorina Taylor! That was her name, as I learned before the day was much older. Sydney asked us if we were walking her way, to which Alizon, for whose mood I could not altogether account, said, not looking at Sydney—

‘I’m sorry. I have an errand to a cottage in Bent-foot. I must leave you, but there is Deb.’ And then she walked off surrounded by boys.

We went with Sydney, and in a conversation that I held with Martin Lancaster, he informed me that he had made the acquaintance of Hugh Entwistle, and that the young lady was called Hectorina Taylor, and was Mr. Entwistle’s cousin.

‘Cousin? Ah!’ said I.

In the course of twenty minutes, Deb and I arrived at home, and a short time after, I, from my bedroom window, beheld Mr. Entwistle and his cousin go up the lane past our house, ‘laughing consumedly,’ as Mr. Mantalini, I think, hath it. I idly wondered what excited their merriment, and then possessing myself of an odd volume of Tennyson and a book of *Studies on the Psalms*, I went downstairs. The latter book was placed open, and under my apron was Tennyson, who was supposed not to be good Sunday reading. When anyone came nigh down went my apron, and I was found studying the meaning of the word ‘Selah.’

CHAPTER VI

BEYOND my lessons I had little with which to occupy my mind beyond that momentous picnic of Thursday. I wished much to talk about it a little to Alizon, but whenever I introduced the topic she declined it decidedly. She would not talk about it. And I actually did not know what I was to wear. It was too bad of her. Goaded to action by continued uncertainty, I said, on Wednesday morning, 'Alizon, what are you going to wear to-morrow?' This, of course, was a preliminary step to the inquiry—What am I going to wear to-morrow? 'My white cambric,' said she, curtly, returning to her book.

'And, Alizon, I have not the least idea what I am to put on.'

'You—why, your piqué, of course; what else have you?'

Nothing! I had a presentiment that it would come to this, but still, with a kind of superstitious faith in the resources of my elder sisters, I had indulged in vague visions of 'something.'

A filmy dream of muslin had floated before my mind's eye. Common sense reduced it ruthlessly to 'your piqué.' Well, obligation has no choice.

On Thursday morning I of course rose at an unearthly hour, wondering what the day would be like, wishing ardently that it might pour with rain, though I own the prospect of further conversation with Martin Lancaster did somewhat take away from the terrors of

the proposed merry-making. On looking out of my window, I found every prospect of a fine day. A high wind was blowing, which, upon the moors, might or might not be agreeable. At half-past ten I was arrayed in my 'piqué,' and my attire was further enriched by the loan of Alizon's best blue bows; I also sported the only 'ornament' I possessed—a cross of some black substance, which I had regarded with deep dislike ever since I discovered that it was not *bonâ-fide* Irish bog-oak, but a base and spurious imitation, worth, as Robin told me with malignant joy, 'just sixpence sterling in British coin.' Alizon made me put it on, saying that with it my toilette looked more *fournie*, which obscure word silenced me at once.

So I sat in her room with my white muslin-covered Dolly Varden hat in my hand. A blessed invention, that of Dolly Varden hats; if those cheap and useful articles had not come in, I, for one, should not have had new head-gear that summer. I sat and watched Alizon arraying herself for departure. She would soon be ready. She was then putting on her best locket. It would look small and mean, no doubt, beside the large gold cheese-plate, garnished with pearls of price, which Sydney rejoiced in; but what of that? Finally, she too stuck on her Dolly Varden hat, and then looked ruefully at herself. That hat was a sore subject. It was black, and had a blush rose in it, and she said it looked 'vile' with the dress she wore. Bad taste or good, I caught a glimpse of her face in the glass, and called out, 'Oh, Alizon, it looks lovely! It suits you capitally, admirably.'

Praise—even the unimpassioned laudation of a younger sister—is sweet. She commanded me with a somewhat mollified expression to approach the glass and put on my own hat. I did so, and we stood side by side looking at ourselves.

'It is a pity that you are so pale, Betty, my dear,' said Alizon, looking—she could hardly help it—pleased

at the superior beauty of her own reflected image. I did look pale. Blue was not my colour, and my white hat made me, I am sure, look rather ghastly. Alizon did, too, look very pretty—so fresh and bright—so fearless and confident, yet so pure and innocent. Though we were gazing at ourselves, poetry burst from my lips, and I murmured something about a lily and a rose.

‘More like a milkmaid and a seamstress,’ said Alizon, ruthlessly. ‘Come! Saxon is calling.’ Indeed he was calling. He had been standing for full five minutes at the foot of the stairs, bawling at intervals of thirty seconds, ‘Alizon and Betty, are you ready?’ The alternate half-minutes had been passed in stamping and muttering. He was only going with us to the gates of Fosshouse. Not for a king’s ransom would he go through the whole day of merry-making.

Soon we were within the Fosshouse gates, irrevocably committed to a day in the society of some fifty of our fellow-beings whom we either did not know, or, if we knew, did not much care for.

In the drawing-room, full twenty people were seated waiting to set off. As we entered, I, looking excitedly and wildly round for Sydney, overlooked, with my near-sighted eyes, the footstool under my very feet, and stumbled over it. I grasped frantically at a table, but missed it. I was falling, but was caught in time by a strong arm, and heard Ralph’s voice, which was never guilty of being murmuringly indistinct, apostrophising me—‘Heyday, Betty! you are always stumbling over something.’

Alizon tried to look as if she did not know me, and I, never having a very painful sense of inferiority in Ralph’s presence, remained with him and Martin Lancaster. At last we set off, half driving and half walking. Suffice it to say, that of those who walked, Martin, Ralph, and I formed part, while Alizon and Sydney both drove. Armed with sunshades, fans, and other futile protections against the heat, we began our

march. We could hardly be called a 'merry band'; in fact, to say truly, the expression on most of the countenances was one of the deepest gloom, varied only by an occasional smile. We went out at the gates like a forlorn hope, and we wound slowly, sadly, and droopingly down the hill to the village. The people who were standing about regarded us with pitying silence, and evidently took us for a party of disguised mourners, while, to do us justice, we did all look thoroughly ashamed of ourselves. Ralph had taken under his wing the three oldest and plainest young ladies present, and was trying to converse with them upon the Beauties of Nature. Some rude, vulgar children coming out of school spied us out, saw the deep-rooted melancholy lurking under our false smiles and would-be gay words, and made a mock at us, singing the following couplet, in tones of the bitterest irony—

'Oh, to see these young lasses, the way they go on ;
Wi' their oyster-shell bonnets and dandy chinon.'

The plain young ladies essayed a feeble titter, and one of them felt her 'chinon' cautiously, or, as Robin would say, 'surrupiously,' as who would make sure that its beauty and the shape of it had not vanished like a dream. Then she looked stealthily around, as if to make sure that no one had seen her, but encountered my ingenuous orbs gazing wide open at her proceedings. She coloured up and looked sour. Martin Lancaster, at my side, sighed heavily, as one whose soul was weary. At last we had left the village, and were out upon the moorland road where Alizon and I had walked that evening. The silence grew more and more oppressive as we proceeded. I began to feel it awful, and said cautiously to my comrade, 'I wish they would go by the short cut over the moor—there, by the old Roman road, it is much shorter.'

'Is there a short cut ?'

'Oh yes !'

'Then I'll tell you what,' said Martin, in a rapid undertone; 'let us go by it. They will never miss us, and I tell you candidly that unless you will do so, I shall cut and run. I can't stand this; the thing is simply horrible—do come!'

The terrible, the stupendous audacity of this proposal rendered me breathless for a short time; but its very boldness, and what appeared to me its daring disregard of conventionality, recommended it to me in an eminent degree; Martin, as he spoke, stepped off the high-road, his boot sank into a knot of delicious, springy heather, and at that sight my scruples vanished like chaff before the wind. Alizon, when she heard of it, would open eyes of horror and exercise the tongue of blame, and mother—if mother should ever know it! But some things, though conceivable, are too frightful to happen. By the time I had arrived at that conclusion, I too had plunged into the heather; I felt myself in my native element and my courage rose. We left the throng of fashionable pilgrims toiling up the dusty road, without being missed. We were not of sufficient importance for that. The wind, as I said, was very high. It roared gloriously overhead, ruffled the heath and ling, and lifted the wool of the dingy-looking sheep that pastured hereabouts. We plunged through the heather in silence till we came to a little hollow, a favourite spot of mine, in order to show which to Martin I had purposely made a little *détour*. High rocks rose around on three sides, and on the fourth the view was shut out by a ridge of moor. In the centre was a little, cold pool, smiling desolately up into the sky. Having brought my companion thus far, I became oblivious of everything except the sound of the mighty north-wester, which was playing a stately major symphony 'over the hills and far away,' and booming over the desolate fells with a weird grandeur beyond words—my words, at any rate—to describe. Every time I heard it, it had for me a stronger enchantment. I turned my face gladly towards

the north-west, whence it came, and listened with high-strung joy to its voluminous, satisfying sound. 'The wind bloweth where it listeth.' Does it? It seemed to me as if no music were ever more regularly toned, more subject to some noble, simple, yet immutable law—if one only knew what it is—than this same wind. How long I had stood there I do not know; I was roused by a light touch on my arm, and looking down from my height of listening, I beheld Martin Lancaster standing erect, his hat off—it was lying where he had tossed it upon the heather just now—his eyes, his whole soul listening. It suddenly dawned upon me that if he had lived all his life in the heart of London he could never before have heard anything like this—so free, so boundlessly vast and grand. When I saw its effect upon him I was almost awe-struck, and stood silent, until at last his rapt gaze ceased, his eyes wavered, and came from the sky to the pool, which lay unruffled by the mighty blast; he heaved a long sigh, and said, 'Ah, I shall never forget that—never. It is worth walking fifty miles for the chance of hearing it.' After that he picked up his hat and turned upon his heel to leave the spot. I followed gravely. At home they would lecture me for indulging in 'raptures,' but I never had been so utterly enraptured as Martin Lancaster just now. Afterwards, when I knew that he not only read but wrote poetry, his ecstasy was accounted for—to me. So we two dreamers, in rather an exalted mood, arrived at the rocks which were to be the scene of the carousal. I saw Alison eye me with a singular glance as we joined the company, but I was too occupied with my thoughts to take much notice of her. I had experienced, within the last half hour, that which would cling to me to the end of my life.

CHAPTER VII

It was nearly seven when we again landed at Fosshouse, and the worst part of the ordeal—to my mind—had yet to be gone through. I was also afraid of being scolded by Alizon for my unconventional behaviour in the morning, and when she came to me, as we were all arranging ourselves in Sydney's room, I trembled.

'How could you be so careless as to walk over the moor, Betty? Only look at your dress! It is literally black all round the hem.'

'My dress!' I exclaimed, greatly relieved and surprised. 'Oh, I can sit in a corner; no one will notice me.'

'Pray do keep in the background!' said she, witheringly.

I had never been present at anything like a dance before, and now I found occupation for all my faculties. The number of guests was increasing, and I was entertained to perceive that Sydney had bidden to her feast every one in Hamerton, utterly regardless of the bloody feud which raged between the two factions. Alizon, Martin Lancaster, and I were together in a window recess. I was giving, *sotto voce*, a catalogue of the different guests to Martin, and Alizon was making her own comments, in a remarkably candid manner, upon Hamerton society in general, and telling Martin that so long as she had some one to laugh at she was perfectly happy.

'Oh, Alizon, I wish you wouldn't talk like that,'

said I, uncomfortably, but Martin appeared rather to enjoy the idea. In order to change the subject ever so slightly, I observed—

‘That is Mr. Carston, the clergyman, and those ladies——’

‘Which?’

‘The three with long thin necks, and pale gray hair—the Miss Mounseys—they are feeling very angry that they should have been asked to meet him.’

‘Heavens! Why?’

‘Mr. Carston’s a ritualist, and they belong to the No-Popery faction.’

‘The what?’

‘The No-Popery faction. They like Tate and Brady’s hymns—they prefer a “minister” who will preach in a Geneva gown, bands, and black kid gloves, and——’

“But that sort of thing’s an exploded idee,” said Martin.

‘And they like the hymns to be given out by the clerk, “Let us sing to the praise and glory of——” why, yes—there’s Mr. Entwistle! There is, really!’

Alizon had left us, and Martin said, looking at me in some surprise, ‘Why not?’

‘And without his cousin,’ I added, displaying my interest in the most open and ingenuous manner; ‘how is that?’

‘She has gone—left yesterday.’

Here the music of a waltz began, and I, looking up, perceived Ralph leading Alizon to the middle of the room. She did not look at all elated, but rather grave—more as if she were going to visit the sick and needy than to dance. Soon the floor was covered with waltzers, and I could only now and then catch a glimpse of Hugh Entwistle in the distance, talking to Sydney Bamford. They seemed to be looking at Alizon and Ralph, and their conversation ceased for a moment, then Sydney said something to Mr. Entwistle. How I

wished I could hear it! He bowed, but in silence, while his eyebrows contracted rather sharply, and I said to myself, 'Yes, I was right; he can look exceedingly cross when he likes.' The dance was over. Martin Lancaster had left my side, though I did not know it, and I was watching with devouring interest, born of freshness and ignorance, the gay people who went marching past my curtained place of concealment like bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. I was tired with excitement and my long walk, and was almost asleep. I was in a secluded nook, and, sure that no one would disturb me, I forgot my dirty piqué and was content.

I believe my eyes had closed, for I was much startled to hear 'Betty!' uttered close at my side, and to feel a fan tapping my arm. I looked up and saw Sydney, in the full glory of her red hair, kind face, and hospitable satisfaction in entertaining a houseful of people, and Hugh Entwistle was at her side. I instantly assumed my company attitude, sat bolt upright, and folded my hands.

'What are you dreaming about?' said Sydney, laughing. 'Do you know Mr. Entwistle, Betty?'

'Yes, perfectly well, but I never spoke to him.'

'Then let me introduce you to him.' ('You to him,' thought I, not 'him to you'—I am a baby yet.) 'Mr. Entwistle, Miss Betty Howarth.'

What is proper to be done on such occasions? I was much exercised, but Mr. Entwistle solved the difficulty by offering his hand, saying—

'Since you know me so well, let us shake hands.'

I put my hand into his, and looked into his face; venturing to put aside Alizon's sneers, Deb's uncomfortable silence respecting him, I formed a judgment of my own—a favourable one.

Sydney had gone away 'on hospitable cares intent,' and Mr. Entwistle, seating himself beside me, said, kindly—

‘Do you know you look very tired? I am afraid you have done too much to-day.’

I was aware that I was tired, but I denied it emphatically, from what reason it would be hard to say.

‘Oh yes; you are tired,’ he reiterated, smiling.

‘Very well,’ I answered, shrugging my shoulders, and because I was shy and somewhat ill at ease, putting on a brusque and off-hand manner, which was no doubt very unbecoming.

‘The next is a galop,’ he said, consulting his programme. ‘May I have the pleasure?’

Now, I was very fond of dancing, and when it is considered that my only partners hitherto had been my brothers or Ralph, and that I did not for a moment anticipate being asked on this occasion by any one else, my emotion at the unexpected honour will be understood. I replied in tones of the deepest gratitude, ‘Oh, thank you, yes! I should so enjoy it.’

He looked at me with an amused smile, and my manner could certainly not be called supercilious, as I continued, candidly—

‘I never expected to be asked.’

‘Didn’t you? Why?’

‘Oh, they say at home I am a little girl, and Alizon says that people of my age ought neither to be seen nor heard, but——’

I suddenly came to a pause, aghast, for I remembered my dress.

‘What is the matter? I believe you are too tired to dance, only you are too proud to say so.’

‘Oh no!’ I stammered, ‘but—but——’ and I cautiously investigated the hem of my garment, so far as I could see it by squinting down the front. That was not so bad, but I, like my sisters, having a slight practical acquaintance with the formation of a dress, was aware that it might be very bad behind.

‘What is the matter?’ he asked, laughing; ‘have you not got on your best dancing pumps, or, or—what?’

'It is my dress,' I replied, goaded to confession. 'The moors are so dirty, and I trailed the skirt all through the heather this morning. Alizon said it was not fit to be seen ; in fact, it is black all round. Indeed, if you could see it, you would not dance with me.'

Mr. Entwistle did not smile ; at least his mouth did not, but in his eyes there was a very decided gleam of some kind.

'Miss Betty, if you told me that your dress was bordered all round with rabbits'-tails—indeed, for anything I know, they may be the height of fashion as a trimming—I should still say, "May I have the honour of dancing with you?"'

'I should like you to see what my dress really is like, first,' said I, 'and then, you know, you can judge for yourself.' And I rose and turned round slowly, nearly breaking my back and neck in the effort to see clean over my own shoulders. When I perceived the dingy border which adorned half a yard or so of the edge of my raiment, I murmured in dismay, 'A sight to dream of, not to tell,' but Mr. Entwistle said, gravely—

'I do see a slight cloudiness upon the otherwise spotless white of your dress, but I think it is rather becoming than otherwise.'

'Then if you really do not mind, I shall be only too glad to dance,' I answered, frankly.

The music had not begun, so by way of continuing the conversation gracefully, I said, 'I saw you at church on Sunday with your cousin.'

'Did you? Ah, yes, I remember. How did you know she was my cousin?'

'I asked Martin, and he told me. Do you know that at Bentfoot the other day every one was asleep except you and me?'

He shook his head in melancholy assent, and at that moment the musicians began one of Strauss's galops. It was to me a decidedly awful moment when Mr. Entwistle offered me his arm and I felt myself emerging

from obscurity. 'Only think,' I reflected, 'of my first dance being with Alizon's enemy!' As we went slowly along, I saw to my right a tall and slender white-clad girl, with a pale face and dark hair and eyes, and with her a tall fair man. It was not until the figures suddenly disappeared that I found them to have been the reflected charms of myself and my companion, seen in a mirror.

When the dance was over, and we were yet promenading, I looked round for Alizon deprecatingly. There she was, talking to a heavy young man of the No-Popery faction. She was saying something that made him laugh—he gave two or three guffaws in a loud, hearty, healthy voice. I saw Alizon give him one side glance of the most profound contempt! I knew that she despised him, and was fooling him, in her usual way, letting him suppose that she was doing her best with herself for his amusement, while in fact she was doing her best with him—for her own amusement. Her cheek was a little flushed and her eyes bright. I saw Ralph Bamford gazing at her from a distance—his devotion was a household word with us.

'How handsome Alizon is!' said I, with hearty involuntary admiration. 'Don't you think so?'

No answer came for so long that at last I looked into his face inquiringly; then he looked down at me, and said, gravely—

'Very, very handsome, dear.'

I ought to have been enraged at such a familiarity—I was enraged, certainly, but it was because I saw clearly that he scarcely realised my presence, and only spoke mechanically. Some one at this moment touched my arm, and I turned to see one of the Fosshouse servants at my elbow.

'A servant has come from Mr Howarth's,' said he, 'and wants to see one of the young ladies.'

Much amazed, I dropped Mr. Entwistle's arm, and was making for the hall, when he stopped me. 'Stay!

I will go with you. I think I know what this is. I heard something before I came here.'

We went together into the hall where stood Jane, one of our two domestics.

'What is it, Jane?' I demanded.

'Oh, Miss Betty, please, Master's very bad. He 'as 'ad a stroke, and I'm to take you 'ome immediate if you want to see him alive.'

'Don't talk such ridiculous nonsense!' said Hugh, angrily. 'Go home again, and say the young ladies are coming. I will bring them home.' Jane went.

'Now,' said Hugh, turning to me, 'suppose you go upstairs and get ready, and I will find Miss Howarth. But I am afraid you will not have ordered your cab for so early an hour?'

'We shall walk. Saxon was to come for us.'

'Then that is all right. Nay, my dear little girl, do not look so frightened! Your father was ill this morning. I heard it in the village, and I trust this is nothing much.'

Sydney came upstairs, helped us to put on our things, kissed and tried to console us. Mr. Entwistle was waiting for us in the hall, and we walked home in the starlight—a silent trio.

Mr. Entwistle, at our gates, repeated his hope that there was nothing to fear, and we went in.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next week passed like a nightmare. Father, whom we all liked better than mother, was 'sick unto death,' and presently proved it by dying, quietly, unostentatiously, as it were deprecatingly, without any heart-rending last words or despairing adjurations to his assembled family. In two words, our father's death was exactly what his life had been, utterly unremarkable. I do not think he ever had much sorrow any more than he ever had much joy in his life. Be that as it may, in a week from that evening when we were all dancing at Fosshouse, he was sleeping in Bentfoot churchyard, and we at home were clad in black, and missed his face at table, his step up and down the house, but not his voice or his influence, for he had had less than no control over any of his own children.

We had now to face facts, and facts were ready to face us, with that obtrusive and brassy stare they are so fond of assuming to people who are poor, weak, or incapable in any way of holding their own against circumstances. Our circumstances, briefly stated, were as follows:—Our father died without will; consequently, until Saxon came of age, our means of subsistence would be even scantier than before—quite an unnecessary curtailment—so both we and mother considered, and it became a question as to which of us must turn out to help herself. Poor Saxon himself seemed suddenly to have sprung up from a lad of eighteen into manhood. Not another word against his hated bank routine; not a

grumble, not a sneer, as of old; but kindly attention to mother, and a harder, more silent study than ever, of an evening. What Saxon's hopes, thoughts, plans might be, no one of us—even Deb—could say, but he was changed.

One afternoon, we three elder girls had a conference in the schoolroom after lessons were over. Ever since our father's death Alizon had been in a frightfully bad temper. Grief—if grief she felt—seemed to make her sore and irritable upon every topic that we introduced. On this occasion she was sewing at a black frock for one of the young ones, a frown upon her face and with rather sullenly-set lips. Deborah was looking on, and I, in my usual graceful fashion, was trying to spread myself over the entire surface of two chair-seats. There had been a considerable silence, which Alizon at last broke.

'Mother told me yesterday that I must think what I can do, for that we could not all stay at home now, until the boys had finished school.'

'Then, Alizon, you and I must work,' said Deb.

'If any one will have us,' she retorted, snapping her cotton with a sudden vicious pull.

'But it will not do for mother to be left alone,' pursued Deborah. 'If one of us could find something to do in Hamerton—some children to teach, or——'

'In Hamerton!' interrupted Alizon, angrily—'not if I know it! It would be unbearable to have to turn daily governess here—where every one knows us. What children are there here, I wonder, to teach? I would rather die than go to any of the grand houses, and as for the other people—vulgar, detestable upstarts!'

'Beggars must not be choosers,' I observed, with my usual happy tact and finesse.

'Hold your tongue, miss!' retorted my elder, savagely, and Deborah smiled in a taciturn manner.

'There is some truth in what Betty says, nevertheless,' she observed impartially.

'All I can say is that I will not work in Hamerton. If we want work I will go somewhere where no one knows me.'

'Are you ashamed of work, Alizon?' asked Deb, seriously.

'Ashamed!' cried Alizon, with the gesture of a queen, 'I should hope indeed that I do not feel it necessary to be ashamed, or proud either, of anything I do! I am not accountable to Hamerton for my actions.'

Deb's eyes met hers, and Alizon's sank; her colour rose; I devoured the outward and visible signs of this inward and spiritual drama, and wished I had the keynote of it.

'Please yourself,' said Deb, after a long pause. 'I wish I knew of any one that wanted a teacher; I would offer myself to-morrow.'

'Deb! To some of these fearful millowners, with their horrid, brand new houses and vulgar wives, and dressed-out children?'

'Certainly, and—I don't know who you mean——'

'Ralph said Sydney said Mr. Entwistle was as true a gentleman——' I began.

'Betty, when your remarks are required they shall be asked for,' said Alizon, fixing a pair of cold, haughty eyes upon me. 'Either hold your tongue until you are spoken to, or leave the room.'

'“Oh Lord, oh Lord, how monstrous unpleasant,”' I quoted from my favourite Austen, and relapsed into a respectful silence, feeling well rewarded for my pains.

'There are no such people as you speak of in Hamerton,' went on Deb; 'some of the rich people may be rather uneducated and ignorant, but I am sure I don't know any so vulgar as you make out.'

'Humph!' grunted Alizon.

'If you both get something to do, who is to teach Johnny and Bobby, and the others?' was my pertinent inquiry.

'You,' said Deb, laconically.

'I?'

From the stupor into which I was thrown by this announcement, I was roused by the entrance of Sydney Bamford. It was the first time I had seen her since the day of the picnic. She looked very grave, and I think her lips trembled; certainly her eyes were bright with tears as we rose—three black figures, dismal-looking enough, and, no doubt, helpless-looking as well. She kissed us all, seated herself in our midst, and said—

'Girls, I should have come before, but I hadn't the heart to disturb you. And I am not going to intrude upon your mother now——'

'Oh, she won't mind,' I began—with tact as usual—but Alizon angrily nudged me with her elbow, and Sydney went on—

'I wanted to see you and ask you to tell me your plans. You must not mind my asking, because I am such an old friend, you know. I never had any sisters but you.' Here she looked round upon us in a motherly kind of way, and yet with some little timidity too. Alizon remained silent, looking down, lips and brow quite stern in their impassive gravity. I felt myself moved by Sydney's sympathy to useless and puerile tears, and Deborah, after a short pause, said, 'You are very good, Sydney. You come at an opportune moment. We were speaking before you came in——'

Alizon looked up in angry astonishment—'As if you could bother Sydney about that!'

I dried my eyes and gave my best attention to the conversation.

'You know we were never rich,' went on Deb, 'and now mother says that Alizon and I must try to get some work and help ourselves. I am quite willing and anxious to begin, but I feel so stupid and ignorant as to how to set about it.'

'That was just what I wanted to know,' said Sydney, 'but you would not both leave Mrs. Howarth, would you?'

'If one of us could do something here,' began Deb, doubtfully, and looking at Sydney, who appeared to be reflecting profoundly, and who presently said—

'Deb, what can you do better than anything else?'

'I can do nothing very brilliantly, but I know some things well, and I can plod—as hard as you like,' said Deb, and I saw Alizon's lip curl; but even I, ignorant though I was, felt that Deb was the more heroic of my two sisters.

'I will think about it,' said Sydney, 'and send you word soon. Cheer up, Deb, you shall not have to wait long, if I move heaven and earth about it. And now, Alizon, what are your plans?'

'My plan is to work with whoever will have me, so long as it is not in Hamerton or Bolton—I do not care where else.'

'As what? Governess, companion?'

Alizon's face flushed as she answered, 'Anything—yes.'

'Would you like to be a companion, and a sort of secretary at the same time, in a very dull, out-of-the-way place?'

'Certainly, if I am capable of it.'

'I am sure you are. We have friends at Skernford, in —shire—a lady and her brother; they are not old—scarcely even elderly, but somehow they seem very lonely and friendless. They are what one would call a little eccentric, I suppose. Miss Labatt would like a young face near her, and to have some one to talk to; and Mr Labatt, who is a literary, philosophical kind of man, wants some one to help him with his correspondence, and with his reading, for his great book that he is writing. They are very wealthy, and are most kind, excellent people, even if a little peculiar. I thought of you at once, and I have even written about

you, Alizon. I am sure, if the place is not filled up, you can have it. Will you ?

‘I think I could please the lady—Miss Labatt, did you say her name was ? But do you think I should be able to do what Mr. Labatt requires ?’ asked Alizon, looking hopeful and interested for the first time in ten days.

‘I do ; you are young, strong—remember, Alizon, it will not be play—I once did secretary to Mr. Labatt for a week, and I shall never forget it ; you can read French quickly, you can learn German enough to help him, and, above all, you are not goody.’

‘No,’ said Alizon, with a smile that had a world of meaning.

‘I shall write again to Miss Labatt to-night. I think I may promise you the place, Alizon.’

‘Oh, Sydney, thank you, thank you !’ she cried, bursting into tears, and kissing Miss Bamford hastily and effusively she made her escape.

‘There is something on that girl’s mind,’ said Sydney, in a puzzled way ; ‘I cannot make her out. Now, what are you going to do about your own little people ?’

‘Betty will teach them as well as she can,’ replied Deb, her eyes resting upon me rather commiseratingly.

‘Betty !’ began Sydney, and paused. ‘That’s a pity, but I suppose there is nothing else for it.’

Why it should be a pity I could not for the life of me imagine. I was rather young, certainly—a little over sixteen, but other girls had had like things to do, and had done them well. Yet, as I contemplated the prospect of keeping in order Johnny and Bobby, my heart sank within me.

‘I must go now,’ said Sydney, rising. ‘Deb, dear, you will always remember that I am your friend—when Alizon is gone you will come to me as if I were your sister ?’

‘Believe me, I will, Sydney.’

With that Miss Bamford and Deborah went upstairs. Our schoolroom was on a somewhat lower level than the rest of the house, and formed a separate wing. I was left to my own reflections, which turned as they had done often, lately, to Alizon; the sister whom I at once admired, feared, and loved more than any other of my kindred. If she went to be secretary to this Mr. Labatt—I wondered what he was like—I was sure he would be impressed with her talents. She told me not so long ago that she meant to seek her fortune. It might come to her in a thousand ways. What would Ralph Bamford say? Neither Sydney nor Alizon had seemed to make any count of him. Poor Ralph! And other people would miss her, too. Some, who disliked her sharp tongue, would be glad she was going—Mr. Entwistle, for example—she always vilified him——

Enter Fanny, Clara, and a small friend of theirs, in noisy exultation; so that my meditations were at an end.

CHAPTER IX

A FORTNIGHT later. On the morrow Alizon was to go out into the world. In another week Deb would begin her career as instructress to three children, the son and daughters of a worthy couple who lived in Hamerton—too fond of their offspring to send them away to a boarding-school, but too genteel to allow them to go to any Hamerton establishment. It was evening: Deb and Alizon were in their room, talking and packing-up, and I had been sent downstairs with orders to keep the young ones ‘quiet and amused’ until bed-time. More easily said than done; I had left my sisters with Hamlet’s remark—“Words, words, words!” and I now looked longingly at the clock. It wanted yet half an hour to the ‘one far-off, divine event’ of my day—the retirement to rest of my juniors. We were in the hall, where we often sat in the summer-time. I had told the most remarkable ghost, murder, and fairy stories that my repertory boasted of. I had just repeated the best part of the *Ancient Mariner*, and was beginning to feel hoarse and husky. My voice cracked now and then into a squeak; my audience, however, were not critical. They cared for story, not elocution, and no sooner had I ceased the last thrilling ballad than they demanded, in a loud, united voice, to hear ‘William and John.’

‘Oh, children!’ I expostulated, my voice becoming yet more unmanageable, ‘let me off! “William and John” is so stupid.’

They, however, insisted. Nothing less than 'William and John' should this night satisfy them. I reflected that by the time I had repeated that exciting poem, and answered their criticisms and comments thereupon, I could send them to bed with a clear conscience, so I began, huskily—

'There once were two brothers named William and John,
Who were forced to work hard every day,
So one of them thought that it could not be wrong
On the Sabbath to ramble and play.

'Said John to his brother one fine Sabbath morn,
"Come! a ramble will do you some good,
'Tis a parcel of nonsense going always to church,
Or else to see Grandmother Wood."

'But William refused, and John was soon joined
By some boys who all laughed at his brother;
But William, as usual, went clean first to church,
And then to dine with his grandmother.'

Having repeated these three verses I paused. The fourth was considered the climax of the tragedy. My audience listened in breathless silence. I warmed with my subject, and endeavoured to throw into my delivery all the fire and elocution of which I was capable. I daresay it would have been impressive but for the increasing huskiness of my vocal organs; it was therefore with a decidedly varied intonation that I proceeded—

'He told her the sermon, and sang her some hymns,
And then in the Bible he read;
And soon after tea was prepared to go home,'

An awful pause. My audience looked nervously around and behind them. My voice sank to an involuntary whisper, as I added—

'When his brother was brought home—*quite—dead!*'

A sigh broke from the lips of my hearers. This was an

anti-climax, but they would have the whole ballad. They thirsted to hear the end of the ghastly tale.

‘He’d climbed to the uttermost branch of a tree,
When it broke—and he fell on his head.
And frightened were all his companions when they
Discovered indeed he was dead.

‘Then William resolved more than ever to pray
To be kept from the idle and rude ;
He grew up a man, became wealthy and wise,
And loved by the pious and good.’

As I finished, a stifled laugh was heard, and some one said, ‘Brava, Betty, bravissima!’ Dreadfully startled, I turned to behold Ralph Bamford and Martin Lancaster. The sneaks—such I considered them—had been sitting on the front-door steps, listening, while I declaimed ‘William and John,’ and now thanked me for the very great pleasure I had afforded them.

‘Children, go to bed,’ said I. ‘Will you come to the drawing-room, Ralph?’ I pursued, loftily, ignoring my late occupation and the laugh yet hovering on both their faces.

They followed me, and we sat down, like the three bears in the legend, in chairs diminishing in size, mine being the smallest and the feeblest in every respect. It never occurred to me to tell any of my relatives of the guests that had arrived. No ; I would entertain them myself. Ralph asked with a mournful face how mother was. He evidently considered it too soon yet to smile in speaking of her.

‘Oh, she’s very well, thanks,’ I retorted, briskly, ‘but very busy.’ Then, feeling that I ought to entertain the stranger, I turned to Martin, and said, ‘You are here yet, then?’

‘Well, yes. It looks like it, I think.’

‘Martin is going to stay.’

‘How do you mean? To live at Hamerton?’

'Yes,' said Martin, not very enthusiastically. 'I am going to be in Mr. Entwistle's mill.'

Deeply exciting announcement! 'Oh, how very nice,' cried I. 'Then we shall see you often. How pleased Alizon will be. She often says that it is worth half a crown to see a strange face in Hamerton, and that the natives are Gothamites—simply. But I forgot—she will be gone.'

'Is Alizon in?' demanded Ralph, passing over my polite revelations.

'Yes. She and Deb are packing-up and talking. When they sent me away they were talking about you.'

'Were they, really? I came to say good-bye to Alizon, if she is not too busy. I could not let her go without coming to say good-bye, you know,' said Ralph, looking round as if that axiom were undeniable.

'I'll tell her,' said I; and I left them by themselves, and made my way to Alizon's room.

I heard Johnny and Bobby pillow-fighting as I passed their room, but winking at the irregularity, I went on. As I entered my sister's room I heard the words, from Alizon, 'I may have been wrong, but I don't think I can ever forgive him, Deb,' and a sob. My curiosity was roused—not an unusual thing with me—and I went in. Alizon and Deb were standing opposite each other, with clasped hands. Alizon was standing stiffly upright; her face was flushed, and there was a constrained pride and hauteur in her entire attitude. Deb looked very grave, and was standing bolt upright, listening attentively. When they heard me they both turned, and Deb inquired what I wanted.

'I want nothing,' I retorted, drily. 'Ralph Bamford is here. He has come to say good-bye to Alizon, and he looks as if he meant it to be "farewell—a long, a last farewell!" I've been talking to him for some time, but at last he asked me where she was, so I've come to fetch her.'

'I will not see him,' said Alizon, turning her back upon us both.

'You must,' said Deb. 'See! Dry your eyes—you look all right.'

'Is Ralph alone, Betty?'

'Martin Lancaster is with him. When I came away they were both staring at the likeness of grandmamma, in the short waist and frilled cap. Martin looked rather afraid of it. Ralph will be reading *Enquire Within* by this time. He always does if we leave him alone long enough.'

Alizon turned to me, saying coldly and quickly, 'Who told you to talk about "Martin?" It is very impertinent. Now, listen to me. Let me see if you can be reasonable for once. You are to come with me to the drawing-room, and you are to stay there, do you hear? You are not to go wandering off into the garden with that boy.'

'Oh, bother!' I retorted, with asperity. 'I've no notion of staying in the drawing-room. I hate drawing-rooms.'

'Betty, you will do as you are told,' observed Deb; and from something in her tone I judged it best to shrug my shoulders in reluctant consent.

Alizon shook hands with Martin and Ralph, and a delightful conversation ensued. They talked about everything under the sun except Alizon's approaching departure. Ralph cast glances now and then at Martin and me. We did not budge an inch. I was taking my revenge for having to sit in the drawing-room instead of having, as I had intended, an intellectual conversation in the garden with Martin Lancaster; my revenge consisted in sitting primly still in a high-backed chair, with my hands meekly folded before me, listening to every word of the conversation between Alizon and Ralph, and not so much as glancing towards Martin.

Ralph at last plunged into the subject next his heart.

'So you go to-morrow, Alizon?'

'To-morrow morning—yes.'

'I felt it would be unkind if I did not come to wish you good-bye. I assure you both Sydney and I are very sorry you are going.'

She bowed.

'And, Alizon, I do hope you will like the Labatts. Of course they will like you. They——'

Alizon was not one to sit patiently under a fire of sentimentalities. She replied with tranquillity—

'I am not so sure of that. I can, when I choose, make myself as disagreeable as any one well can be.'

'Yes, Alizon, you can,' said I, heartily, and speaking for the first time.

'When you try very hard, perhaps,' said Ralph, smiling a fond, incredulous smile, and I was seized with a sudden and desperate desire to laugh. He looked so very absurd. We all looked absurd. Tableau—a young gentleman doing his best to be tender under very trying circumstances. A young lady in no wise disposed to return the tenderness, with red eyes, a nose tinged with the same hue, and looking, so far as her youth and beauty would allow her, *farouche*, *mutine*, anything uncompromising and unyielding. A strange boy who perceived that all was not square, ill at ease, and wishing he could find any decent excuse to walk away. Injured sister of the young lady, coerced into a duenna against her will. I was just digesting the scene, when Ralph put the climax to my emotion by adding, in what was, for him, a low, insinuating voice—

'If you are yourself, Alizon, you cannot fail to please.'

Alizon raised her eyes to the ceiling for an instant, and then said, 'Thank you, Ralph, but I don't exactly know what I am. Let us hope that I may be able to say with Consuelo: "*Dieu m'a inspiré d'être simple et modeste*," when I meet my—master.'

Somewhat nonplussed, for he was far from being an

erudite French scholar, Ralph paused, and Martin, who had been clasping a thick stick to his bosom, with that affection which Englishmen only bestow upon walking-sticks and dogs, let it fall with a loud crash to the ground.

‘Dear me!’ said Alizon, when we had all started violently, ‘is that a life-preserver, Mr. Lancaster?’

‘That depends upon circumstances.’

‘I longed for a weapon of that kind last Sunday afternoon,’ pursued Alizon. ‘It was in church, and I was sitting with those dreadful Sunday-School boys. I could not keep them quiet. They would play with their hats, and when I deprived the one nearest to me of his, he looked at me, and said, “Gi’ me yon ’at, lass, or aw’s’t holler.” Of course I gave it back immediately, and then they began to suck pieces of toffee. At least they had one piece, and when it had been the round they offered it to me. So thoughtful and nice of them. Boys are generous.’

No one attempted any reply to this monologue, and Ralph, finding that neither Martin nor I stirred, cast one ireful glance at us, and rose.

‘Good-bye, Alizon, and I hope——’

‘Don’t hope anything for me. I’m going on trial, Ralph, to see if I suit this old gentleman and lady, and if I don’t I shall come back. I am very busy; good-bye.’

They shook hands, Alizon with her brightest smile, Ralph with the longest face I ever saw him wear.

On the following morning a large body of us went to see Alizon off; Deb, myself, Johnny, and half a dozen or so of the younger ones. Alizon had a journey of seven hours north. We all stood round, and Johnny gave her minute and compendious directions about luggage and ‘changing in a very loud, authoritative voice.

‘Well, young gentleman, your instructions are

audible, at any rate,' said some one, and we all turned round. I saw with a sort of shock the kind, handsome face of Hugh Entwistle. How short a time it seemed since I was dancing with him at Fosshouse. He looked at the group of black-clothed boys and girls, and said, 'How do you do, Miss Deborah?' and held out his hand. Then he found out Alizon, in the railway-carriage, and would shake hands with her, too. She was reluctant, I saw; but that frank, sunny smile, and the manner which made it all a matter of course, were not to be gainsaid.

Would he know me again, I wondered? Yes, he shook hands with me, and looked at me a little longer than was necessary, I thought.

'Seeing your sister off?' said he to Deb, when Clara, the youngest of us, began to cry, saying—

'Alizon, me nebber say good-bye to you—me want to say good-bye.'

'And so you shall,' said Mr. Entwistle, promptly, picking her up, and lifting her to Alizon. Perhaps this last thing was the one drop too much for Alizon; the thought that those baby kisses must touch her lips no more for so long, overcame her. 'Good-bye, my pet!' she whispered, as Clara clung round her neck, and I saw that Alizon's lips quivered.

'Suppose,' I thought, as I breathlessly watched them, 'suppose the train were to start off, and their heads knocked together!'

But nothing of the kind happened. Mr. Entwistle lowered Clara safely to the ground again, and said—

'I must go. The Bolton train is waiting at the other side. Good-bye, Miss Howarth. May I wish you good luck?'

'I suppose so,' was what appeared to me the ungracious answer.

'Then I am sure I do.'

With that, and a last look round upon our group, he was gone; and in a few minutes our sister's face had also vanished from our view.

CHAPTER X

ALIZON'S JOURNAL. *July*—18—.—I landed here on Tuesday evening, at half-past six. This is a quiet place. I was almost the only passenger who alighted, and I found a big carriage waiting outside the station, sent on purpose for me. We had not a very long drive. What a different country this from the bleak moors around Hamerton. This is level and rich; there are cornfields, and meadows scented with hay; they were leading it through the lanes, piled up on big carts; it smelt so sweet. The trees are large and shady; not a trace of a long chimney to be seen in any direction. I don't know whether I like it; I am inclined to prefer the sombre outline of Blackrigg, though it can frown sometimes.

We stopped at the hall-door of a large, imposing-looking white house. It is called Oaklands, and there are some very fine old trees of that kind in the garden and grounds—also a contrast to Hamerton. I was left in the vestibule, under the charge of a butler, who led me on towards the hall—such a splendid old hall, full of oak, and with a marble floor; these people have taste and cultivation—one sees it in every appointment in the house. The butler was about to show me into a room, when a man came across the hall from another part of the house, and accosted me. He was tall, thin, and his hair slightly, very slightly, gray; bushy eyebrows, dark flashing eyes, and a slight stoop—'not handsome, but commanding,' as romances say. I knew

in an instant that he was a gentleman, born and bred—though I have met so few of them—indeed he is what they call a ‘fine gentleman,’ I think—fine in the higher sense of the word.

‘Miss Howarth, I think?’ said he.

I bowed, and he continued.

‘I am happy to see you. My name is Reginald Labatt. I believe my sister is out, but, if you are not too tired, I should be glad if you would let me have a few words with you in my study.’

‘Certainly,’ said I, wondering if we were to begin writing letters, or making extracts at once, and he showed me into his study, and then sat down opposite me.

‘I first want to explain to you the plan on which I work,’ said he, ‘before Delia comes in. My family, I believe, has a crest and motto; the motto is in ancient French, and signifies something equivalent to advising one to strike while the iron is hot, about the most pernicious sentiment ever devised. We have long ago abandoned any such plan. We not only wait till the iron is getting cold, to strike—sometimes we do not strike at all. My motto now is the motto which this age in general might very well adopt as its leading principle—*Laissez faire*. Can you *laissez faire*?’

‘I am sure I will try if you wish it,’ said I, much surprised. ‘But I hope from that that you do not mean you have no work for me to do.’

‘Very far from it. You will have a great deal of work to do. My *laissez faire* principle extends chiefly to the more important concerns of life—for instance, I think no great work can be done by persons who allow personal feelings—emotions, likes, and dislikes—to influence them. It is much better not to have too great an affection for people.’

‘There I quite agree with you, sir,’ said I, heartily. ‘It is the one thing about which I have a strong conviction myself. I don’t care much for any one, and do not intend to.’

'Then let us shake hands,' he said; 'I think we shall agree.' And we did so. I liked his face better after I had listened to him talking for a little while. I began to think it was rather handsome, and if it did not sound so sentimental, I should say it was shadowed with some trouble, past or present, which was not so easily to be got over.

After this interview, he confided me to the care of a servant, who showed me my room, and told me they dined exactly at eight. And accordingly it was exactly eight when I came downstairs again.

Going across the hall, as I came down, was Mr. Labatt with a lady on his arm. He stopped when he saw me, and said—

'Delia, this is Miss Howarth; Miss Howarth, Miss Labatt.'

She is a tall, straw-coloured woman; I can find no other epithet for her. She had pale yellow ribbons and flowers in her cap, and a white and yellow gown. She is very tall and very haughty-looking, but not so really. She has an air of high breeding, which shows through all her quaint, eccentric ways. Once she must have been decidedly good-looking. She shook my hand very pleasantly, and said she was glad to find I was punctual; her two great aversions were untidiness and unpunctuality. Bearing in mind this announcement, I was rather surprised to notice, during dinner, that her hair was very untidy. Her cap was crooked. Her belt was fastened crookedly—if her maid had ever put her straight at all, she must have undone it all again afterwards. She reminded me of the White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Struck with this, I looked at Mr. Labatt, the *laissez faire* philosopher. He was in the strictest evening dress; there was not a hair out of place, not a crease in his coat except where there ought to be creases. He had a rose in his buttonhole, and diamond shirt studs. Some people might call it finikin, but oh! what a delightful change after the

Hamerton men! Will he expect very much from me, I wonder? I do hope he does not think me cleverer than I am. My duties have begun. It seems to me that what I have to do for Miss Labatt is nominal, but for him endless. There are so many letters to read and write, nearly all upon scientific subjects. I frankly told Mr. Labatt that I did not understand what I was writing about, but he said I should soon educate myself to it if I were fortunate enough to like intelligent topics. He corresponds with a great many scientific men, and writes for scientific journals. He gave me an essay to copy out for the *Biological Inquirer*. I seem to be in a new world. I believe he goes to bed about one in the morning, and gets up again at two or three; but I am happy to find that he allows other people to be made of flesh and blood, and does not expect me to be down till eight. We generally work from eight till nine, when we have breakfast, and Miss Labatt seldom appears till it is nearly over, though she is so fond of punctuality.

Then I generally help Mr. Labatt, reading or writing for him, till lunch, which is at two exactly. If Miss Labatt is then in the house, she generally meanders into the room about ten minutes after the bell has rung, and smiles, and says she is glad to see us so punctual.

In the afternoon I may do as I like, for Miss Labatt is so kind, she never will ask me to do anything for her, because she says I must be so tired—which I am not; but I have discovered that she always takes a drive when the afternoon is fine, and that she does like to have a companion, so I always go with her. Very often after dinner my time is my own too, though there is sometimes a little reading or writing to do. It is not a hard place, and I like the work; but if it were fifty times as hard I should be thankful to be here, and away from Hamerton.

I have only been here a fortnight, so I really can

hardly say what the place is like, but it appears to consist very much of curates and ladies—young and old, and there appears to be a general impression abroad that Mr. Labatt is a 'dangerous' person. I suppose that means advanced. He knows it and laughs at it, and he says that Haythorpe has never got over the shock of his having a laboratory—the people think it 'such a strange thing for a gentleman—only fit for druggists.'

Meanwhile, I do not rely upon his *laissez faire* principles, for last night, when the conversation turned upon what Miss Labatt calls the Woman Question, and she said something rather slighting about it, and I betrayed my profound ignorance of the whole subject, Mr. Labatt dropped *laissez faire* like a shot, and lectured us both with the utmost heat and fervour. In the evening Miss Labatt remarked to me—

'There is my dear brother's weakness; he is so terribly, so deplorably unpunctual, and he is simply infatuated upon all these questions. Part of the work he has so long been engaged upon is devoted to the "Progress of the Woman's Cause during Historic Times."'

Poor Miss Labatt! I like her, and I am sure she has had trouble. She has a noble face, though she does wear her caps awry and has very untidy light hair.

CHAPTER XI

THE pith of the foregoing chapter was related by Alizon in a letter to Deb, which she allowed me to read, and I immediately began to feel a lively interest in Mr. and Miss Labatt, and to plan out histories for them in my own mind.

As yet my own trials had not begun. It was holiday time; the boys were at home, and one might as soon try to wring tears from a flint as get any of the younger fry to do lessons, when that was the case. I must say that I did not regret the pause. We received Alizon's letter one evening, and when we had read it, I remarked with fervour—

'What luck that girl has! How I should enjoy myself if I were Alizon! Doesn't it seem different from our humdrum stupid way of going on, Deb?'

Deb sighed, and then said, impartially, 'There must be people, though, to go on in a humdrum manner, or else——'

Unwilling to listen to a sororal homily, I quietly, but firmly, made my exit, and passing through the hall, possessed myself of a battered old hat, brown and of enormous size, also an aged and superannuated sunshade, both of which were the possessions of all the girls of the family. Thus armed, I sallied forth to the garden, to a peculiar haunt used only by myself. It was at some distance from the house; there was a wall, a leafy shade, and a projecting stone, upon which I could sit and, leaning my elbows upon the wall, look around and

down. The lane ran underneath the wall, but not many people ever came past; now and then a cart laden with 'pieces' or 'shoddy stone' from the quarry, or cotton warps; or sometimes a couple 'coortin', which in Hamerton is a peculiar process. It consists in the lady taking the extreme edge of the road at one side, and the gentleman at the other; they walk with averted faces, and never speak to each other. After some weeks of this lively wooing the banns are put up, and they are made one flesh, but I never heard a Lancashire married man complain that his 'missus' had nothing to say for herself.

Of course I was supplied with a book; when was I not? My study this evening was to be Keats. I turned over the pages. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,' met my satiated view. Bah! In that case familiarity had bred thorough contempt. But hold! Looking farther on, I perceived 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil.' The title was attractive, and surely I had read, heard, or dreamt something about a pot of basil and a dead man's head. I must hasten to find out whether this poem were the answer to the misty idea floating about my brain. So I began—

'Fair Isabel! Poor, simple Isabel!' and I soon was eagerly following the cheering strains of the verse. I had just got to the 'melodious chuckle in the strings of her lorn voice,' when from below, down the lane, I heard a doleful ditty approaching. A sad, minor key; what were the words? They came nearer and nearer, and at last I recognised them, unlovingly—

'Je suis ce que je suis;
Je ne suis pas ce que je suis—
Car si j'étais ce que j'é suis,
Je ne serais pas ce que je suis.'

Well did I know them, and well-thumbed was that page of my French grammar on which they stood. To hear them then lightly sung to a tune seemed little

short of desecration, when I remembered my weary toil over them, and my search, 'careful and with tears,' for the meaning of the two '*suis*.' But who in Hamerton could be singing them? The voice was not too melodious; it was husky—it was cracked. As its owner drew nearer, I recognised him. The singer, or howler, was Martin Lancaster. Unless I spoke he would not know that I was here. Should I speak? Why not? I yearned to converse with him—to emulate the Athenians of old, and spend a little time in the hearing or the telling of some new thing. Well, I needed not to speak; I could cough. So I did cough—a choking, croupy, thoroughly artificial cough. He heard it, cut short his unmelodious chuckle, and looked round. I stuck my head out between the branches of an elder-tree. He saw me, but merely remarked, 'The owl in the ivy-bush sat.'

'How do you do? Where are you going? What are you singing?' Such was my catechetical greeting to him.

'I am doing as I would not be done by on any account. I am going to see an individual who should be my friend according to Scripture—his precious balms have gone so very near to break my head. And I was singing just what came into that broken head. *Voilà tout!*'

'And pray whose precious balms have gone near to break your head? There are none in Hamerton, unless you count the cold-drawn cod-liver, castor, and olive oil sold by Mr. Schofield, the chemist, as balms.'

'Your grammar is far from being a healing balm.'

'How long are you going to stay in Hamerton, Martin Lancaster?' I inquired, for I could not bring my tongue to say 'Mister' to this stripling.

'Why, Ralph Bamford was telling you the other night. I am going to stay always. And it was Mr. Ertwistle's balms, literal and metaphoric, which have been injuring me so; he has reproved me, and—to

‘speak in a parable—smitten me friendly, and the smell of oil and other matters in his factories is of such a fearful nature’—he shuddered heartily—‘oh, how horrible to have to smell that every day!’

‘Oh, it’s nothing when you are used to it. If you are going into his mill you will have to learn how to weave.’

‘So I am told.’

‘Saxon—my brother—knows how to weave.’ I continued, ‘He adores machinery, and he has to be at the bank at Bolton, which he detests, and——’

‘What very strong language you use, Miss Betty.’

‘As you are going to stay here always, would you mind calling me “Betty”? We shall soon get to know you very well, I daresay, and I think my name is much less objectionable without a handle. And—the fact is, I shall never remember to call you “Mr. Lancaster,” so we may as well make it even, don’t you see?’

‘I am greatly honoured,’ said he, bowing deeply; and I, with my usual yearning after useful information, said—

‘And where are you going to live—at Fosshouse?’

‘Why, you seem to know nothing. I’m going to live here.’

‘My good boy, what do you mean?’ I demanded, using, in my excitement, a formula which I usually applied to my brothers when I wished to irritate them.

‘I mean what I say. Your mother, Mrs. Howarth, and your sister, Miss Deborah——’

Here I interpolated a burst of laughter. My mirth was both loud and long, and as he stared at me his face got very red. ‘Miss Deborah! oh, oh!’ I managed to gasp out at last. ‘Oh, that is too much. I wish they were here to have heard it.’

‘You must be, as they say here, a little “off it,”’ was his candid comment. ‘As if it were usual to talk of young ladies whom you have seen once by their Christian names.’

‘But it is so ludicrous to hear you with your “Miss Deborah,”’ said I; but, suddenly remembering that as yet I only knew a part of this wonderful news, I hastened to make up my lost time by demanding—

‘If you are coming to live here, when are you coming?’

‘Oh, soon. When I see the Bamfords are tired of me.’

‘I am very glad you are coming,’ said I, ignoring the fact that his coming would doubtless be a source of pecuniary advantage to mother, and that the Bamfords must have arranged it.

‘You need not be glad. I am anything but a pleasant person.’

‘Of course you must say that,’ I answered, resolved to show that I had some knowledge of the hollow ‘tricks and manners’ of a worldling. ‘People always talk so, but they never mean it.’

A dry, derisive smile dawned upon his mouth as he answered, ‘If you asked any of my people whether I had spoken the truth they would all shout out “yes,” loud enough for you to hear from here to Hamerton.’

‘I wish you would tell me something about London,’ said I. ‘Have you ever seen the Claimant?’

‘Yes,’ was the reply—calm as if I had said, ‘Have you ever seen a policeman?’

Here, from the garden, came a most *à propos* strain—the voice of Johnny, uplifted in his favourite cantata—

‘If a man weighed four-and-twenty stone, they’d say he was Sir Roger;

They’d take him before the mighty judge, and hang him for a dodger.’

‘When you come here, that is what you will hear from morning till night. It never stops, or if it does he sings, “My mother’s got a mangle,” or, “If ever I cease to love,” which are rather worse.’

And at that instant Bobby’s voice was heard from

the other side of the house, whither he had wandered, and there floated adown the evening air, to a well-known popular 'melody,' the words—

'Cheer, boys, cheer! my mother's got a mangle.
Cheer, boys, cheer! it's made of wood and stone.
Cheer, boys, cheer! my father turns the handle.
- Cheer, boys, cheer! it's all my mother's own.'

'Doesn't it remind you of Mr. Mantalini, grinding away in the cellar?' said I.

'But do they sing those very often?' inquired Martin, dubiously.

'Often! As I said, they never stop, except when they are eating. They wake up with the words on their lips, and begin by instinct as soon as their eyes are open. As cook says—"Them boys is at it the 'ole blessed day.'"

Mr. Lancaster seemed to droop at the inviting prospect which I had represented to him, and in the momentary silence that followed my description of the ballad-singing propensities of our boys, I perceived, hanging from the brim of my hat, a creature of the insect tribe, with a long body and many legs.

'Take it away!' I murmured, not daring to speak aloud; 'oh, for heaven's sake take it away!' and my eyes nearly turned round in my head in my upward gaze at the monster.

'What, what, what? Where, where, where?' he cried, unintentionally mimicking his late deplored Majesty King George the Third.

I indicated the incubus, and closed my eyes while he removed it.

'That is the worst of this leafy place,' I complained; 'it is as bad as Mrs. Nickleby's arbour, where they had tea, and the earwigs always fell into the tea on their backs, and kicked dreadfully.'

'Oh, the insects here are nothing. I know a fellow who has been in India, and he told me about the grubs,

and the worms, and the flies, and the beetles,' said Martin, sinking his voice and smiling, as though he could a tale unfold if he only chose.

The subject had ever had for me a loathly fascination. I urged him to give me some second-hand descriptions of India's Insect World, and he told me a few highly embellished anecdotes of scorpions, centipedes, and other natural curiosities, winding up with the mention of a 'kind of thing' which bores into the flesh, and he knew a fellow who knew a lady who was walking in a wood——

'Oh, don't!' cried I, breaking the spell which held me attentive so far. 'Why do you do it? "Wherefore all this wormy circumstance?" Do give over!'

'Well, you provoked it.'

'I am sure I never did. I hate beetles.'

He laughed aloud. 'Pardon me, but your face was enough to make one go on. Your eyes asked me to go on. It was irresistible.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said I, gruffly. 'My eyes never ask things. I don't believe in language of the eyes except in poetry and novels, and that kind of nonsense. Do you read many novels?'

'Sometimes,' he answered, sedately, after eyeing me curiously for a second or two.

'I know such a funny man,' I went on; 'he is our milkman. I was once sitting here reading *Jane Eyre*, when he came past, and saw me, and he asked what I was reading. I said a novel. He stopped, and spoke very long and very kindly to me about the bad effects of novel reading. Then we argued a little, but finally he left me, saying, "A novel's a book as is all lies, about things as ne'er was nor ne'er will be, and I'st advise yo' ne'er to ha' nowt to do wi' em."'

Martin did not seem to see the point of the joke.

'Why don't you laugh?' I asked, in an injured tone.

'I don't understand you in the least. Were you trying to talk like a milkinan, or what?'

'It was the dialect,' I answered, ruffling up, for I prided myself upon being able to talk 'Lancashire' with any native—'and if you don't understand it you don't understand a very good thing.'

'I don't like it. It sounds coarse and vulgar.'

'For vulgarity give me a Cockney twang. The Lancashire dialect is pure, good English. I know some beautiful pieces of poetry in it.'

'Poetry in that! Oh, come!'

'Yes, poetry: "God bless thee, my son, Robin," and "Come, Meary, link thi' arm i' mine," and lots more. Don't talk about what you don't understand.'

My feelings were seriously hurt. I pulled my old brown hat over my eyes, retired within my leafy cage and said, stiffly, 'You are prejudiced and ignorant. If you mean to see Mr. Entwistle to-night you should go to him. It is late to be making calls.'

No answer; dignity bade me remain where I was, and calmly finish reading 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil;' but curiosity, the sin that did most easily beset me, upset both dignity and displeasure. I peeped out. There was the remnant of a smile hanging about Martin's lips; he folded his hands, cast down his eyes, and said, meekly—

'I beg your pardon, Miss Betty. I do not understand the Lancashire dialect. I know less than nothing about it. I am as ignorant as a worm of its very elements. I spake unwittingly and as a fool might speak concerning it. It may be the only English dialect worth speaking, as Tuscan is the purest Italian, Attic the best Greek, and that French most to be preferred which is spoken about Avignon, but——'

A horrible, degrading suspicion began to dawn upon me. He was laughing at me, as if I had done or said something that was silly—I, who would soon be instructress to my brothers and sisters. My spirit rose indignant; by way of showing him how uncalled

for was his mockery, I grew crimson, and said in a great passion—

‘You are very rude! I never knew any one so rude—no, never! I detest you.’

And I felt that unless I took to flight as rapidly as possible I should begin to cry with rage and mortification. My cherished Lancashire dialect and myself—laughed at!

‘Oh, I say!’ he exclaimed, in a startled voice, ‘I beg your pardon, I do, indeed, Miss Betty. I was an awful donkey to behave so. Yes, I was rude’—he stamped his foot despairingly on the ground, as I gathered up my numerous impedimenta, thereby diminishing a good deal the impressiveness of my flight—‘Don’t go, Miss Betty—Betty—well, I did not think you would be so unkind.’ This last in a deep tone of reproach and mortification.

I began to think I was perhaps behaving rather like an imbecile, and arrested my preparations for flight.

‘Don’t say any more about it. It’s all right. I beg your pardon too!’ I said rapidly. ‘But I must go in, whether you stay here or not. Good-night!’

The gratification which now overspread his visage was as great as his recent dejection.

‘Good-night!’ he rejoined, with a profound salaam, and then I at last escaped, with my hat, Keats, sunshade, pencil, paper-knife, and pocket-handkerchief, not so sure after all I had not been laughed at.

It now became my instant duty to go and interrogate Deb upon the subject which had been so iniquitously concealed from my knowledge. Where was she? From the drawing-room came sounds of music. Our aged piano, with the stifled wheeze which contrived to predominate over every other sound, was being made to give forth what melody was yet contained within its enfeebled and attenuated frame. I peeped into the room. Deb, as I expected, was seated at the ‘instru-

ment,' as mother always called it—and in any hands but those of Deb it was an instrument—of torture. She was singing, 'Harold the Valiant,' or rather the treble part of that once celebrated quartett. After recording at the top of her voice the doughty deeds of the rather boastful gentleman, she, with a fine fervour and energy, and striking chords which tried hard to be imposing in spite of woodiness and confirmed asthma, declaimed—

'Ah, Harold! Check the empty boast! A Russian'—chord—'maiden'—chord—'scorns'—chord—'thy love!' Chords and runs *ad lib.*

Sure that she was too thoroughly exhausted and out of breath to suppress me, I introduced myself with the unvarnished announcement, 'I've been talking to Martin Lancaster for a long time.'

'Oh, have you?' panted Deb.

'Yes. Why didn't you tell me he was coming to live here? Do we know anything about him? And why is he going to be at Mr. Entwistle's mill?'

'What is your name? Who gave you that name? What did your godfathers and godmothers then for you?' inquired Saxon, from the sofa corner, where he had been listening to Deb's melodious strains.

'It is not necessary always to explain everything to children,' was the answer with which she sought to crush me and my curiosity. 'Martin is coming here for reasons which satisfy mother, and that is all you need to know. His people and the Bamfords are old acquaintances.'

'Oh, indeed!' said I, superciliously. 'That is all very fine. You may think I believe you, but——'

I paused significantly.

'Slope!' commanded Saxon. 'Leave Deb and me alone. We have business to discuss.'

'I have a good mind to sit down on the door-mat and stay there,' I angrily answered, enraged at being treated as a child.

‘Slope!’ he commanded again, in accents sterner than before, and I heard a mutter, at the end of which came something sounding like ‘greased lightning.’

Being acquainted with the fact that if the mandate were not obeyed, consequences would probably follow, I reluctantly left them, and returned to my own speculations.

CHAPTER XII

It was five weeks later. July was almost over, and we did not expect much summer weather after July at Hamerton. But I had now, or ought to have had, no time for mooning and dreaming. My family had always said that Betty required some real practical hard work to transform her into a sensible person. The hard work had come; but the less said about the consequences thereof the better. My career as instructress of youth had begun. I was more than sixteen, and I had to cope with four beings born without the capacity of understanding the meaning of respect or veneration. I was expected to 'ground' them in the elements of an English education. My operations were perforce of the kind spoken of by the prophet—'Here a little and there a little, line upon line, and precept upon precept,' only that those to whom I preached took no notice of my exordiums.

I daresay Johnny, Bobby, Fanny, and Clara did not deliberately own to themselves their intention of inflicting upon me as much torture as their brains could devise, but none the less did they succeed admirably in that end. As a sister, no doubt they cared for me to a certain extent; I was a useful machine for telling exciting stories, for romping with, hauling about, playing practical jokes upon. As a teacher, I had stepped into Alizon's shoes, and had become, in their opinion, a tyrant, a fell adversary against whom nature bade them wage war, whose ends it was their duty to circumvent.

They did not realise, and would have scorned to entertain the idea, that if they had worked with me instead of against me it would have been a joy to me, and much less trouble to themselves. They rather enjoyed the excitement of baffling my schemes and confounding my politics, while I, resolved to leave no jot of my duty unperformed, returned again and again to the charge, and hated with a deadly hatred the very thought of my daily task.

A small, mean, insignificant trouble, no doubt. So it was, but it darkened my life. Existence just now was not bright to me. How I abhorred the thought of that schoolroom; of those rounds of ill-done lessons; of the miserable idea that at 12.30 p.m. I should dismiss my pupils, fully conscious that they had done all they ought not to have done, and nothing that they ought; that they had shirked each task; had defied me openly, or baffled me by cunning, while I, from sheer physical incapacity, had been forced to yield to them in some degree. I was as miserable as I well could be, but I would not speak. I could at any rate suffer and keep silence, as Deb did. I knew that Deb did not find her work very agreeable, and I knew too that not even to Alizon did she drop the faintest hint of her aversion. And what had I to tell, if I did complain? How Johnny would not do his sum, and how, when I, trying conciliation, said, cheerily, "Come, Johnny, let us see if we can't manage it together!" he made hideous faces at me, thrust out his tongue, and said, 'Very like a whale.' How Fanny sat a whole hour with a grammar before her, and glared at this abstruse sentence—'Nouns are the names of persons, animals, places, and things, as *man*, *cow*, *town*, *box*;' and how, at the end of that hour, she said she did not know what it meant. No! From all that my relatives said, they considered me quite fit to cope with two unruly boys and as many mischievous girls. Far should it be from me to undeceive them, and in this frame of mind I

struggled on, feeling each day less ready for the fight, and more possessed with a longing to give up, and if possible to go somewhere where no one could find me, and cry for a week, and then sleep for a year.

The first break in this delightful monotony occurred one Sunday afternoon in the middle of August, when a body of us went as usual to Bentfoot Church. There was a Harvest Festival, and I had behaved with even less than my usual equanimity and presence of mind on account of my wonder at the behaviour of Robin. When the sermon began, I saw him, in his place in the choir, draw something from his pocket—what I could not tell, and turn his back as much as possible upon the congregation. With downbent head, and an occasional convulsive heave of the shoulders, he continued thus absorbed for some time. His provoking surplice prevented me from seeing the object engrossing his attention. But I burnt with curiosity to know what it could be. Last night he was reading *The Dog Fiend*—could he have brought it for further perusal during sermon time, as Saxon once did with *Peter Simple*? Thus I amused myself by reasoning from the known to the unknown. Never, for a moment, did the truth dawn upon my mind; not even when he turned a face brimming with laughter, fixed my eye, and winked at me.

Service over, we met Ralph Bamford in the churchyard. When he saw us, he invited us to go and have tea at Fosshouse, saying Sydney had told him not to come back without us. Deb, Robin, Bobby, and I accepted the invitation.

As we walked along the hilly road, amongst the first of those who left the churchyard, I took the opportunity of further distinguishing myself, by drawing the attention of the rest of the company to the behaviour of those props of the No-Popery party, the Misses Mounsey.

‘Did you see them?’ I said to Ralph. ‘They had

new green bonnets, pulled very much over their foreheads, and tall combs sticking out behind.'

'Had they? I never saw them.'

'When do you see anything?' was my mental comment upon this remark.

'But I did,' said I; 'and what is more, I will tell you how they were dressed.'

'I am afraid, Betty, that you are not very attentive yourself,' said Ralph, mildly. He did not realise that there could be anything amusing in the appearance of the Misses Mounsey.

'Oh, bah!' said I. 'They each had the right glove off and the left glove on; their off-gloves were laid on the ledge before them. Their prayer-books were what they sell for half a crown at the post-office, with the new lectionary—with neat black backs, but no crosses—that would be Popery. Their gloves were light gray, and had two but——'

A violent poke from Deb, whose face was purple, caused me to look up. Footsteps behind us. The three Miss Mounseys came sailing past us, each with her dress drawn up to exactly the same height above a white petticoat with sixteen tucks, over a large crinoline—each carrying a white sunshade lined with green—each attired in a black silk jacket with voluminous *paniers*.

They all turned 'eyes left,' and each head inclined in a very obtuse angle from the shoulders of its owner.

Ralph, Robin, and Bobby veiled their blushing visages behind their hats in three profound bows. Deb's parasol suddenly shut up accidentally. I alone was speechless, motionless, carmine.

'I saw them coming,' remarked Robin, when they had gone past. 'But it is always good to let people hear the truth of themselves, so I let you go on.'

My flow of humour being suddenly quenched, I fell a little behind, and Deb and Ralph had the conversation to themselves. It was not loud, nor overloaded

with eloquence, but it referred to Alizon; that I could hear.

Arrived at Fosshouse, Ralph pushed open the gate, and ushered us all into the garden. All I at first perceived was what seemed to be a large variegated bundle under a tree. Coming nearer, and peering at it with my shortsighted eyes, it resolved itself first into a muslin garment of ample fold, and, yes, two yellow sunshades. Strange! Coming yet nearer, I perceived legs under one sunshade; and as the sound of voices attracted the holders of the parasols, these useful machines were slowly raised, and under one was disclosed Sydney Bamford's honest countenance and ruddy locks, while the lifting of the other revealed the uncovered yellow head of Hugh Entwistle. Two chair backs also dawned upon my view. Hugh Entwistle rose, holding his sunshade with the gravity of a Chinese emperor; Sydney welcomed us, and very soon tea appeared. The shade of the tree was pleasant. Sydney, Ralph, and Deb were talking together, still about Alizon, I fancied, but was not sure. Mr. Entwistle, coming to me, sat down beside me, and said—

'You look very tired.'

'Those are the very words you said to me the first time I ever spoke to you.'

'Well, I never see you without thinking them. I am afraid you are not strong.'

'I am as strong as Goliath. I never was ill for a day in my life.'

'Have you heard from your sister?' he inquired, after a pause.

'Oh yes. I think she is rather enjoying herself. It must be rather a funny place where she is,' and with that I related to him the best part of Alizon's first letter to Deborah.

'Really?' he remarked, in a curious tone, when I had finished. Then, turning to Robin, he asked me—

'How old is your brother?'

‘Nearly fifteen. His name is Robin, and he is quite the nicest of my brothers.’

Here we both continued to gaze benevolently at Robin, in utter ignorance of the terrible weapon he that moment held in his hand.

Robin was saying something to Sydney, and he appeared to be feebly resisting some request of hers, but his lips twitched with laughter, and his eyes glanced sideways to me. I, however, continued my monologue to Mr. Entwistle, until I saw from the laugh upon his lips and the light in his eyes, that neither was he listening to me; and, bringing my remarks to an abrupt conclusion, I tried to understand why all the others were laughing so loudly.

What was that sound that saluted my ears? Robin’s voice, and he reads aloud:—

“She smiled scornfully and bitterly, and waving her hand, answered, ‘Poor fool! see how you have circum—circumnavigated—no”—in a puzzled voice—“circumscribed, circumvented—ah! circumvented yourself! Behold how all your treachery has recoiled upon yourself. Go! and henceforth——”

“He seized her hand, and drenched it with his tears, replying after a number of convulsive sobs—

“Ah, Medora! Sweetest! Fairest!
Thou of maidens art the rarest!
Pause! nor doom to tortures endless,
One who . . .”

‘Robin!’ I shrieked, as the truth burst upon me, and I sprang up, and made a frantic clutch at some sheets of paper which his long arm waved far aloft. ‘Give it to me! How dare you!’

‘What is it?’ asked Hugh, in astonishment.

‘It’s Martin’s and my novel’ was my despairing cry; and then, in my excitement, I laughed wildly, and made desperate jumps at Robin, who flourished the paper up and down, always just beyond my reach.

gasping out, between fits of laughter, further extracts from the luckless MS.

The others, all but Hugh, were laughing convulsively, and asking for more, and their utter indifference to my woe galled me. Soon, I felt, I should cry. At last Robin made a dash out of the circle, and I sprang after him. I had a long, hot chase, but at length caught him alone, at some distance from the rest of the party, malevolently chuckling over what Martin and I considered the most fearfully touching and tragic scene ever penned, except, perhaps, by Shakespeare, Sophocles, or some one or two other unapproachable giants of antiquity.

‘Please, Robin, give it me!’

‘Go away!’ said Robin. ‘I must see the end of *Medora*. I didn’t know you were a genius, Betty; indeed, I am not, sure of it yet. Poetry too, by Jove!’

‘Robin, give it me!’ I felt my lips tremble ignominiously. Robin looked up. That I was in earnest, and on the verge of tears, only added a zest to his joy. He licked his lips with a feeling of agreeable anticipation, and eyed me stonily. I had actually begun to cry, when—a hand was put over Robin’s shoulder, and, to his profound discomfiture, his prize was quietly wrested from his grasp. He looked round in amaze, and confronted a hatless man, composedly holding a yellow sunshade over his head. Mr. Entwistle, with a smile which belied his voice, said—

‘Miss Betty has just been telling me you were the nicest of her brothers. If that is the case I am afraid she has a bad time of it at home, and I should suggest that you apologise.’

By this time my tears werê dribbling gently down my cheeks, while I sought feebly for my pocket-handkerchief. In that quest, however, I paused, with a sound resembling a sob, but which was really a convulsive laugh. Mr. Entwistle’s simplicity in recommending

Robin to apologise, struck me as something so exquisitely absurd. If Robin did—but he would not. It was preposterous.

‘Well, you know, Betty, it was only a joke; don’t make a row about it.’

‘B—but don’t tell Martin!’ I almost whimpered, as a vision of that youth’s wrath and fury, if ever he should know, rose in my mind.

‘Oh, bless you, no! I don’t want to tell him. ’Tisn’t worth the trouble. I am going home now. Ta-ta!’

Mr. Entwistle, as soon as we were alone, offered me the sheets of paper. I took them, sorted them, and shed a few more furtive tears over them.

‘I will not ask any more questions, Miss Betty; I conclude, from your distress, that the novel was only meant for your eyes and Martin’s.’

‘It was an experiment. Martin thinks that the fiction of the present day might be immensely improved by two people writing together, one in poetry and the other in prose; and all those scenes which allow of it, to be given in verse, either blank or rhymed. He says it would gradually elevate the tone of our fiction, and refine it, and I am sure it would. So he and I planned a kind of novel—a tragedy. He was to do the poetry, and I the prose. He has written several most beautiful poems for it already, and I write a sort of connecting links, you know, in prose.’

‘Something quite unique, I perceive,’ was the grave response.

‘Yes, I think it is, quite. I did say to Martin, at first, that the idea rather reminded me of when the showman of a panorama explains the views; but he said that was absurd. There was no analogy at all.’

‘Far from it,’ replied Hugh, unblushingly. ‘You want the great idea kept a secret, I see, until it is finished. May I ask what it is to be called when complete?’

‘Medora; a Rhymed and Unrhymed Page from the

Human Tragedy,' I replied. 'I'm sure, if Martin ever knows it has been laughed at, he will never put another word to it. He thinks ridicule ought not to be used against poets. Ridicule killed Keats—that and misrepresentation. If the others did not know about it, I would ask you not to make fun——' My voice broke again.

'My dear Miss Betty,' he said, earnestly, as he grasped his sunshade firmly, 'laugh at you—why should I want to laugh at such a sweet——? No, I will never make fun of it.'

'You are very kind, and I am much obliged to you, I'm sure.' I unconsciously sank my voice, but still said, aloud, 'I can't tell why Alizon dislikes him so.'

With that I looked at him, and became aware that I had not only thought, but uttered—I had been known to do this idiotic trick more than once before—and worse than all, he had heard me. Certainly he had heard me. Glancing at him I saw how he had reddened all over his fair face and forehead, and how his brow contracted in that quick hot-tempered way I had noticed before.

By this time I was trembling with fear and discomfort, and my face was as red as his own. 'I looked up, I looked down, I looked around, and at last said, with vicious emphasis, 'I wish my tongue was cut out—that I do.'

'Wish no such thing,' said he, the feverish hue on his face cooling down somewhat. 'But be glad you can only cause such pain in ignorance and without intention. Nay, my dear little girl'—why did he always call me 'little girl?'—'I was as tall as Alizon—'do not fret about such a trifle.'

'You told Robin to apologise to me for not half as much as this,' I said, pulling myself up, but determined to show that I was not quite a baby, not quite indifferent as to whether my words hit or missed, 'so I beg your pardon for what I said just now. It was no business of mine, I know. I'm sorry.'

‘Granted! Let us forget it,’ he said, with the generous sunny smile that entrapped my esteem long ago. Seeing that I still hesitated.

‘Shake hands upon it,’ suggested he, heaping coals of fire with a liberal hand upon my diminished head. Therewith he shifted his sunshade from the right hand to the left, and held out the former smilingly.

Without a word I placed mine in it, and we solemnly see-sawed once up and down, and then went back to the others—to Sydney, Bobby, Deb, and Ralph.

CHAPTER XIII

‘MY DEAR DEB —“ Men may come, and men may go ” —which mystic sentence I will explain hereafter. I am very busy; I begin to feel a person of importance. Don’t you perceive a change in my handwriting already—something of the strong-minded blue style creeping into it, with the letters all slanting sternly from left to right ?

‘So you are going on in the usual way. I can just see you all at home, though it is so long since I was with you. How long have I been here ? Two months—it seems ages. You want to know how I get on now, how I like Mr. and Miss Labatt, whether they are kind to me, and so on. Oh yes ! And I like them. But these generalities are meaningless. I had better enter somewhat more into details.

‘After I had been here about a week, I formed an opinion of this establishment, which was, that it was a queer but humdrum sort of place, and that Mr. and Miss Labatt never had had any background to their lives ; never any hopes or fears disconnected with—on his side, science, and on hers—never any at all. She could never have had any real life. And this, I thought, was probably the reason why they indulged in so many curious crotchets, fads, and fancies. But now—I hope I am not getting nervous with sitting so much over my writing, and with Mr Labatt’s uncanny figure—for he is uncanny—it grows upon me—opposite me, for ever frowning while he reads or writes. He does so frown ; I keep looking to see if my own forehead is not getting wrinkled.

Mais revenons à nos moutons ! One day I came into the drawing-room from the garden, with some flowers in my hand. Miss Labatt was sitting on a sofa near the long window by which I entered ; she had a fan in her hand—a big, old-fashioned Chinese fan. She was staring at it very earnestly. I came to her ; her book and her handkerchief had fallen to the floor, as they always are doing. I picked them up, and laid them upon her knee, and in the place where she had been reading I stuck a rose. She looked up, but I do not believe she saw me. Her face was as white as Betty's when she is very tired and very bored. She sat still, looking at me so, until I grew uneasy, and said,

“I hope you do not feel ill, Miss Labatt.”

‘She sighed and smiled at the same time, and after looking at the open fan again, shut it up, and almost flung it from her. I did not know what to say, but began to have a dim fear lest she should be going cracked. Suddenly she reopened the fan, and said to me—

“Do you see this, Alizon ?”

“Yes,” said I. “It is a handsome old fan. It must be worth something.”

“She smiled mournfully, and went on—

“I found it in a drawer which I had not looked into for long—oh, so long——ah !” and she shivered. “And now look there !” she added, pointing to a picture on the fan. You know how absurd Chinese pictures are. This one was a faded old thing. There were tea plants in the most amazing perspective, some apparently in the sky, and others growing about promiscuously anywhere. Behind a bush, which did not in the least conceal him, was a man, with flowing hair and big shoes ; he was pointing some kind of weapon at another man in the foreground, who had been hit, to all appearance, for he was kicking out wildly, and his pigtail was sticking straight up from his head. I began to laugh when I saw it, but Miss Labatt shut it up, shaking her head

and almost groaning, and saying, "And at this time, too, of all times!"

'I wanted to comfort her if I could, but I did not know how in the least, so I murmured something about not understanding her.

"No, of course, not," she answered, in a trembling voice. "Of course not, child!"

'Then picking up her fan she said, "I hope never to see this again, but I can't throw it into the fire. My dear, will you keep it if I give it you, and take as much care of it as if it were not the gift of a faded old woman?"

'I could have cried to hear her talk so, and I said—

"Indeed, Miss Labatt, I will—not because I prize the fan, but to please you, and in remembrance of you."

"That is very kind," said she, and she put it into my hand, and said—

"Wait a moment."

'I stood still, while she eyed me over, and said, half to herself—

"Yes, bright hair and clear gray eyes; tall and slim, like a willow wand—with the long black dress and little white frills. How like! And yet, I hope you are better—you must be better!"

'With that, she covered her face, and drew a long sigh. Putting aside the fan, I knelt down beside her, and asked—

"Dear Miss Labatt, do I remind you of some one you have known?"

"Yes," she said, slowly, as if she were looking back upon something in the past. "Once I saw a girl standing where you are standing now, and she gazed—'with hair like sunlight, and face like clay,'—upon the men as they—ah! it does not allow itself to be remembered! She had that fan in her hand, and she paused, as you paused. My dear, I hope you will never have such a memory in your mind, as I have now in mine."

'Oh! Deb, how sorry I was for all the silly things I had said of poor Miss Labatt, under the impression that

they were funny. Do forget them all ! Presently she sent me away, and told me to put the fan away, and never let her see me use it. When I came downstairs again, there she was, with her cap all on one side, looking just as untidy as usual.

‘That is mystery number one. I have now mysteries numbers two and three to relate to you. The day before yesterday, I came down to breakfast, and went to the library as usual, fearing I was a little late, but Mr. Labatt was not there. I took up a book, and read for some time, and still he came not. At last the butler came and told me that breakfast was ready. I asked where Mr. Labatt was, and the man merely said, “He never comes out of his room on the 10th of September.”

“Oh, indeed !” I replied, feeling as curious as Betty ; but it is against my principles to ask servants about things, so I held my peace, and breakfasted alone. Mr. Labatt never appeared that day, and as Miss Labatt never uttered his name, I dared not breathe a word about him. Yesterday, at the usual time, he came down again, looking older and uncannier than ever. He made not the least allusion to his absence of the day before, but he had evidently not opened the letters which had come for him, so there was double work to do.

‘Now for the third mystery. Yesterday, at lunch, Miss Labatt was talking about the Bamfords, and asking me a good many questions about my family. She inquired if we were not very dull at Hamerton, and was it not a gossiping little place ? I said it was, perhaps, a shade less dull and gossiping than Haythorpe, and that we liked it in summer, but in winter it was the most dreadful place to live in in the known world. She said that the members of a large family formed a little society, and I said “Yes,” and that you had a companion in the shape of a young man who lived with you, and who helped to make it more cheerful.

"Oh!" said she. "Is he some cousin or connection of yours?"

"No," said I. "He is a young friend of the Bamfords, who has come to learn the cotton trade. His name is Martin Lancaster."

'She set down her wine-glass with a shaking hand, and looked apprehensively at her brother. I too looked at him. He had turned pale, and though he looked at me twice, as if to speak, yet he said nothing. You may imagine how uncomfortable I felt. I sat and stared first at one, and then at the other, until Miss Labatt said—

"My dear, don't be distressed. Painful memories are connected in our minds with that name."

'I murmured something about being sorry, unintentional, and so on, and she said, "Say no more about it."

'Mr. Labatt did not speak again during the meal. When he got up to go to his study, he stooped, as I thought, more than ever, and looked so old, so gray, and so worn. And yet he is not an old man. Something has happened to them sometime, at this very time of the year, for when we were talking about the shooting one day, I asked if Mr. Labatt did not shoot.

'Miss Labatt looked at me in astonishment, and said—

"Shoot! What are you talking about?"

"I beg your pardon," said I. "I really did not know that shooting was such an offensive topic to you."

"No," said she, after a little pause; "my brother does not shoot, though he allows his friends to come and shoot his preserves, but never until after the 10th of September."

'Intensely mystified, I said "Oh, indeed!" which expression, as you know, forms my usual refuge when I am hard up. Since then I have once or twice caught Mr. Labatt's eyes fixed upon me with a curious, inquiring look, and once I was sure he was going to ask me a question, but none came. This is a trifling matter, but if it goes

on much longer I shall get excessively nervous. Fancy being haunted by the idea that every time you look up you will find a face with its eyes fixed upon you, its lips open as if to speak !

‘I began this letter by stating that “men may come and men may go,” by which I meant that—so Miss Labatt tells me—Ralph is perhaps coming here for some shooting ; and Miss Labatt warned me never to ask any gentleman who might happen to be here what sport he had had, or indeed to mention shooting at all. Altogether, it is, as Miss Martha Mounsey would say, “puzzling and peculiar.”

‘Now give my love to all you dear people, and write soon.
ALIZON.’

CHAPTER XIV

ALIZON'S missives excited my most intense curiosity, but as I perceived that Deb did not wish to talk about them, I held my peace, a thing which was becoming easier to me than of yore, and thought about my eldest sister's position in private and alone.

Alas! It was the end of September, and the Hamerton summer had long been past. The rainy season had set in. To say that the 'rain fell in rivers' would suggest something which in comparison with the reality would be dry and salubrious. If the rain only fell in rivers, we at Hamerton rejoiced and were glad; we simply put on our boots of strength, armed ourselves with the family gamp, and went whither we would. It was when it rained lakes and inland seas that we—not wondered—no amount of cold water ever made us wonder—but grumbled a little, *entre nos dents*, shrugged our shoulders, and diverted ourselves by calculating how many weeks of similar delights were laid up in store for us. Our house in this weather was both cold and dark. About once a week we had a comparatively fine day, during which the meadows wiped their faces, as it were, the hills cleared themselves somewhat of mist, while in the background the clouds gathered themselves together for a fresh and mightier deluge.*

'Rain makes rosy cheeks,' says the old saw. A foolish old saw too, so far as our case goes, for Deb's face got paler and her eyes more lack-lustre every day, and I, when I viewed myself in my looking-glass, beheld

a visage approximating more nearly on each occasion to the colour of chalk or skim milk. Now and then mother would interpose, severely—

‘Betty, pray do not stoop so! Your deportment is lamentable! Your attitude irritates my nerves.’

To which rebuke I could oft have made the retort courteous that it irritated my own no less, but that I had neither strength nor energy to sit up. Instead of that I would drag myself up into a more upright position, but gradually sank back again into my graceless, doubled-up attitude—thinking often that my mind, if I could see it, would resemble my body in its position.

The days went by, one murky day after another, and we saw no one and heard nothing; in fact, our usual Hamerton winter was beginning. Sydney Bamford was away, rejoicing with friends at Brighton. Ralph too was away; we missed his bi-weekly visits, though he was not a genius. Other people, if at home for the time, had either been, or were going, away. Only we, the Howarths, continued to live on in stately conservatism at our ‘place in the country,’ as Saxon grimly christened our abode.

I toiled on with my thankless pupils, each day making a little less progress, each day feeling a little less able to cope with the unruly members of my family. My heart asked for change, though I did not admit it to myself, and only vaguely wished that the weather would change, or that something—I cared not what—would happen.

One evening, leaving the family circle round the dining-room fire, I repaired to the schoolroom in search of a book which I believed I had left there. I shut the dining-room door, and stood in the hall for a few minutes. Our front door was shut, not set wide open as in the joyous summer-time, and in lieu of the warm, yellow rays of the setting sun, and the soft, purple haze upon the distant moors, pale moonbeams, ‘gray and ghast,’ came floating in through the fanlight and side

windows, and glimmered upon the various homely objects around. As I stood in the centre of the hall, I heard subdued sounds of laughter, in varied, softened cadences, coming from the door I had left. Therein was warmth, fire, cheerful talk; here it was cold, chill, and damp. The contrast struck upon me; a wave of some strange, new, or little known feeling swept over my mind. I suddenly felt more small, more slight, more powerless and lonely than ever I had done before. The passionless moonbeams were bathing me in their light; that I knew, and as I raised my face towards them, they seemed to fall dull upon it, as cold as sunlight is warm.

I clasped my hands tightly together, and stood there wishing I knew not what, sorrowing for something, hoping for something which I could not define. I could have cried, but I could have smiled too; so to compromise matters I sighed a long, heavy sigh, and departed along the long, cold, stone-paved passage to the schoolroom. I descended the flight of stone steps leading to it, and looked around. The door into the schoolroom was half-closed. I hunted about for my book, and could not quite shake off that weird feeling that came over me in the hall. Not finding my book, I pushed open the dividing door, to seek it in the next room. A blast of damp yet balmy air saluted my face. Who was that leaning out of the open window, his elbows upon the sill, and his thin, irregular young face outlined against the moonlight? He turned as I came in, and looked at me for some little time, as I stood, recognising, but disinclined to speak.

'Oh, it is you, Betty?' he said at last, and I answered, 'Yes.'

'What brought you here?' Tired of the family circle, and lively conversation, oh?'

'N-no—yes, I was, rather. I want a book too. Martin, have you seen your *Fairie Queene* anywhere?'

A pause.

'I think I see her now,' said Martin.

'Oh, really, Martin! I never can get a serious answer from you. A fairy queen in an old black frock that used to belong to one of her sisters! Besides'—as various details proper to the orthodox fairy queen came into my mind—'fairy queens are always clad in grass-green gauze gowns, and have a star on the brow and a glory of golden hair, and the reddest of lips, and the rosiest of cheeks. Contrast that with me, and don't be foolish, that's a dear boy.'

'Those are the vulgar fairies of story and romance. But there may be fairies of sorrow, melancholy, and thought. Penseroso fairies in opposition to allegro ones, and you are one of the penseroso fairies. Your pale face, and dark eyes, and dusky hair mingle with the moonlight, and belong to it; that long black dress that clings about you——'

'Yes, it is skimpy—a breadth short,' I reflected aloud.

'And instead of a star on your brow you have that white cross round your neck. Betty——'

I laughed what I intended for a rallying manner.

'At any rate, allegro or penseroso, you never heard of a fairy queen called Betty!'

This I felt to be a clincher.

'Didn't I? If there never was one before, that is no reason why you should not inaugurate a dynasty of fairies with that name. Why not? Betty—my fairy queen, Bet——'

'Your fairy queen Bet, indeed! Martin Lancaster, I never heard such nonsense in my life. Have you been writing poetry?'

'No, only thinking it! Come and look out, and tell me what you think of all this.'

He took my hand and led me to the window. I leaped out, and looked around. By daylight, the prospect from our schoolroom window might safely be called prosaic. But night, with her moonlight, mystery, and

'trailing garments,' overwhelms and veils the commonplace objects. We, at least, in our ignorant young enthusiasm, did not notice railway lines, and factories and factory chimneys. We only saw the solemn, gray, white light on the trees, like a ghost's shadow, and the distant, phantom-like ridges of the moors. We heard too the sound of water through the stillness. It was only the water of a dirty brook running from some dye-works not far away; but the brook was hidden from us, and the sound was as sweet as if it had been made by one of Marlowe's

'Shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.'

Martin stood beside me, and we looked out. The rain had ceased, and such clouds as remained were scudding rapidly away before a light, fresh south-west wind. Side by side with Martin, I leaned out of the window, and something of the glamour of dreams and uncertainties was upon me. A sense of joy stole over me—joy that I had left my place by the fireside and come here to experience what appeared to me a much superior feeling.

'How long had you been here, Martin, when I came?'

'Nearly an hour. How delicious this wind is! Like kisses, ain't it?'

'I don't know—we don't kiss in our family,' said I, scarce hearing him. It was after a pause, and in quite a different voice that he said—

'Betty, were you ever out of doors at midnight?'

'Never in all my life. I have read about a boy who engaged to steal a piece of ivy from a church porch, and he saw what he thought was a ghost—of course it was at midnight—and ever after he was either a raving lunatic or a chattering idiot—I forget which. So I have never had any wish for midnight excursions.'

'That kind of midnight excursion is simply imbecile, I think,' said he. 'One can

“Wander in a green churchyard,
And let one's spirit, like a demon mole,”

et cetera, in the day-time. I am thinking of something very different.’

‘Why, are you planning a midnight excursion?’ I asked, excitedly.

‘It has been planned for some time. I have only been waiting till the moon should be full to put it into execution. I expect it will be grand. There is a luxury in a weird sight, sound, or sensation worth paying for by a little toil or trouble.’

He spoke in a tone of such hearty conviction that I demanded eagerly—

‘Tell me what it is, Martin!’

‘Since that day of Sydney Bamford’s picnic I have had an intense desire to see that queer, wild reservoir on the top of the moor by moonlight.’

‘Oh, Hoarbent!’ I whispered, intensely excited at the idea. ‘Oh, Martin, will you take me too?’

‘You!’ said he, quickly. ‘Dare you do it? No one must know about it. I’m not going to spoil it by telling any one. I am not going to set out till midnight, and I will have the scene at its very best, at the most ghostly hour of the twenty-four, when it is neither night nor day.’

My nerves responded with a thrill to his words. Little fool that I was, the enterprise immediately assumed the most gigantic importance in my eyes. Go I must; go I would. Such a chance might not come to me again in my life.

‘If you will take me, Martin, I will not fail you in anything, nor breathe a word to any one.’

‘Can you keep a secret afterwards, too?’ he demanded.

I nodded. ‘Do take me!’ I reiterated.

‘You need not implore me in that way, Betty!’ said he, impatiently. ‘Do you suppose that I had not

thought of you before, as soon as I thought of going at all? But I did not ask you, because'—rather bitterly—'I never can tell from your manner one minute what your mood may be the next.'

At present I was oblivious of everything, save that I had gained my end. Martin would take me with him.

'My mood from this moment, until we have accomplished this plan, Martin, will be an unvarying one—to do whatever you tell me, for you must make all arrangements.'

Martin turned to me with parted lips, as if to speak, but suddenly closed them again, and looked at me with a strange smile.

'What are you looking at me in that way for?' I asked, not very politely.

'Trust me, Betty! We will have a clear course for our journey to-morrow.'

'Is it to be to-morrow?' I asked, joyfully, when—

'Betty! Bet—ty!' came sonorously resounding down the passage.

'Well?' I shrieked in answer, after giving a jump of surprise.

'Sup—per! Por—ridge!' was Bobby's answer. 'Where's Martin?'

'Here!' I replied, in the same high-pitched cry, 'With me! Come along, Martin!' and I turned to him, and found, to my surprise, that he looked quite annoyed. He followed me, however, and as we neared the dining-room, we heard Bobby, the ever-hungry, chanting in a loud voice, from *Mavor's Spelling Book*,

"I want my din—ner. I want pud—ding."

The porridge turned out to be poor stuff—thin, watery. Bobby, a very coarse boy, asked, contemptuously, 'Do you call these porridge?' while Saxon, ironically quoting Miss Austen, observed, "'Suppose we all have a little gruel.'"

But these things were to me mere trifles. I consumed my plate of diluted oatmeal with a good heart.

CHAPTER XV

MIDNIGHT, the next night. Martin and I stood in the moonbeams in the schoolroom again. He looked quiet enough. I did not know how I looked, but I felt nervous, awe-struck, desperately afraid. I did not, however, shrink from our expedition; to have given it up would indeed have caused a bitter pang.

Martin softly opened a window. I looked out. Clouds were scudding across the sky faster than they did last night, and the weather looked unpropitious. I may as well mention that I was clad for our romantic expedition in a short black frock, a waterproof cloak, a villainous old hat, and remarkably strong, solid boots, a pair which had been in my possession many years, and were known in the family as 'Betty's canal boots.'

I surveyed the night.

'A dusk star blinks, as fleets the rack,' and the wind, instead of entering with its balmy south-western sigh at this window, was whistling drear and shrill around the other side of the house.

'Martin,' I suggested, in a ghastly whisper, 'don't you think I had better take an umbrella?'

A fine scorn developed itself upon Martin's face. 'Umbrella!' was all he said, and I was silenced.

Having opened the window to its utmost extent, Martin mounted the sill, which was low and easy, and lightly touched the ground. He offered me his hand, and in an instant I too found myself in the garden. We crept guiltily and softly up the lane, and soon had

passed the solemn old house called Stanlaw, and were out upon the Blackrigg Road. 'Bitter chill' was the wind that blew upon us. Pure north, and a wet north wind too, than which there is no more biting blast.

'I should think,' I remarked, shivering, and drawing my aged waterproof more closely around me, 'that "the owl for all his feathers is a-cold" to-night—I know I am.'

The moon, too, declined to behave in a satisfactory manner. Oftener than not, the huge, snowy-looking clouds obscured her completely, and the road was very dark. We were now walking between two little woods, one on either side of the road, and I reminded myself we had a long way to go. It took more than an hour to climb to the top of the long slope, and arrive at the side of the reservoir. My sensations were weird enough—according to Martin that should be a luxury; but as yet, I only realised that my feet, within my boots, might, for anything I could say to the contrary, have been paving stones from that heap by the roadside, and that my hands burned with a stinging heat. We walked faster, and presently the first numbness gave way to an inordinate heat. A feeling of excitement did dawn over me as we crept past the last house until we should come to the lonely white inn at the top of the Edge. It seemed to me, though, that this particular walk had never taken so long before. We finished it at last, sneaked past 'the White House,' and turned off to the left. A few yards, a short scramble, and we stand leaning our elbows on the wall of the reservoir's embankment, and looking at the sight we had been longing for. The effect is nearly black; black moors, flat and drear, in the midst of which seems to lie a yet blacker sheet of water, swaying restlessly under the black sky. Surely, if we wait, the moon will come out again, and give us something worth looking at. At this moment I felt a cold sting upon my face and realised the pleasant fact that it had begun to

sleet. A truly cheerful prospect. We waited for what seemed to me a long time. The warm glow which exercise had given me passed off as I stood quiescent in the teeth of that wind, and I grew gradually chill to my very bones. At last the clouds broke. The moon shone out. There was a lull in the wind, a light on the water, which splashed against the embankment.

Not for five minutes did our improved circumstances endure. The clouds closed in again, and all was dark as before. What was worse, it began to sleet again in good earnest. We turned homewards, and Martin suggested that we should take a short cut over the moor home. To this I demurred; it was so dark, we might lose our way, or stumble in a moss-hole, or do a thousand uncomfortable things. Martin, however, overruled me, plunging right into the gully leading to the moor, and I, from sheer necessity, followed him.

It was very dark, very damp and very lonesome. My heart was beating at a tremendous rate, every pulse throbbing; it all seemed so unreal, so unearthly. As we sank, as it were, into the arms of the moors, that inky embrace seemed to annihilate us. We plodded on, and ever the sleet came faster, and ever the wind blew keener. Each moment did I feel what a idiot I was to have undertaken such an expedition with a scatterbrain lad like Martin Lancaster. He was not communicative. He did nothing to cheer or buoy me up. I heard his steps before me, but scarcely saw him.

'Halt, Betty!' cried he, suddenly, and I stopped as promptly as I could, though, having been going at a round pace, my own momentum propelled me forward two or three steps.

These two or three steps were exactly what I ought not to have taken, had I wished—to use an allegory—to save myself alive.

Bang! Plash! went first one boot and then the other, into a particularly succulent patch of bog, so deep as soon to overwhelm my boots. Though they were so

large, I could not have supposed it possible for them to hold so much water as I felt was running into them. *Experientia docet.* Thus pleasantly situated, I turned and demanded of Martin where he was.

'Here!' he answered, from a short distance, 'and a jolly mess this is! Have you got into the bog, Betty?'

'Yes. *N'importe!*' was my resigned reply. 'I suppose the finger of destiny led me here. And now, as sure as I stand here, I do not know on which side to look for the road. My understanding is clean gone, in every sense of the word.'

Martin hunted diligently for the road. While he did so, I remained patiently fixed in the puddle, fearful of moving to right or left, lest I should sink 'deeper and deeper still' into my Slough of Despond. After five minutes or so of such delight, Martin announced that he had found the road, and presently offered me his hand to help me out of the quagmire. With boots that went plash plash at every step, we went our weary way, and the moon condescended to give us a feeble, fitful expiring ray or two ere she disappeared behind the hill.

By this means we gained the high-road again, and after a rapid descent, lasting for some quarter of an hour, we arrived at the lane leading to my home. A minute or two more brought us to the house. Martin helped me in through the window, and then, striking a match, consulted the big watch on the chimney-piece, which informed us that it was 2.30 a.m.

Not daring to venture along the stone passages in our boots, we were reduced to sitting down on the floor, to take them off. I unlaced mine with difficulty, and essayed to remove one of them. The bloated, flabby thing declined to be detached from my foot; three times did I try, and, at the fourth attempt, it came off, certainly, but fell with a loud crash to the floor.

'Ssh!' whispered Martin, apprehensively, but my next boot served me the same maddening trick. Taking

them both in my hand, I said, as distinctly as my chattering teeth would allow me—

‘I’m g-going upstairs now.’

‘All right! And, Betty, keep it dark, that’s a good girl.’

‘Oh yes!’ I answered, not realising that my promise might not perhaps be so easy to keep.

Then my saturated stocking-feet glided along the uncarpeted stone passages, and the chill I felt struck to my very heart. I gained my room; never had I been so glad to see it. I hastily divested myself of my soaking raiment, and scrambled as rapidly as possible into bed, fondly trusting that I should soon be warm and fast asleep. Vain delusion! For a long time I lay and shivered so strongly that my bed shook under me. Then I found myself becoming fiery hot; my cheeks burning like furnaces seven times heated, and my eyes obstinately refusing to keep shut. Tossing aside the bedclothes, I gasped, and wondered what made me feel so unnaturally hot and wakeful. All the time my imagination, which appeared to have taken the bit between its teeth, persisted, whether I liked it or not, in traversing that fearful Blackrigg Road. I stood, gazing at the black reservoir; I felt myself stumbling down the rocky, dark moorland road; I was surrounded on all sides with morasses and quagmires. Turn which way I would, my feet sank deeper and I stuck faster. I called to Martin, and he made no answer. I got frightened. I no longer really knew where I was. I cowered under the bedclothes, under the impression that I was hiding in a cave that I wot off on the moor. What was that ghastly gray glimmer that would not go away, and kept getting broader and broader? I was convinced that it was a sheeted ghost, or perhaps the Faerie Queene, angry that I should have been compared with her, for did not Venus take awful vengeance on Psyche for daring to compete with her in the matter of beauty? My head throbbed as it had never throbbed before. I felt as if

I had twenty heads—each one a centre of excruciating pain. Unable to understand the horrible sensations I felt, I began to cry feebly, and presently dropping off into a kind of sleep, dreamt that some one—one of the Miss Mounseys, it appeared, was torturing me with red hot pokers and skewers. I awoke suddenly under that impression, and on trying to turn over in my bed, and draw up the tumbled blankets, I shrieked aloud, for the most frightful pains shot through every limb. Some time or other—it might have been in a few minutes, or it might have been that hours elapsed—the door opened, and Deb came in. She looked around in bewilderment at my amazing aspect; at the heap of wet clothing on the floor; at my boots, each of which had been the source of ‘rivers of water’ of some volume.

‘Betty, what on earth does this mean?’ I tried to stretch out my arms to her, but again those terrible pains racked me. I murmured, or groaned out something about ‘Blackrigg—Hoarbent—ask Martin——’ and for a long time I knew nothing more, but seemed to be dwelling in a land whose very air it was torture to breathe.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN I began my experience of rheumatic fever it was October ; when I reappeared for the first time in the downstairs regions it was nearly the end of November. Not that I had been actually ill all the time, but I was not allowed to leave my room, and was so weak that even to speak or be spoken to by any one made me cry ; in consequence of which, mother, Deb, and the doctor remained for a long time my only visitors. Each day appeared to me exactly one hundred and sixty-eight hours long. Whatever my fault may have been, my punishment was truly a severe one. Never, from infancy, had I been of that robust and hardy constitution which could stand any amount of exertion and knocking about, but equally, never had I known a day's real illness. Of all things, confinement to the house was most irksome to me. Many a time during my illness and convalescence did I wish heartily—wishing being the only thing left which I could do heartily—that I was dead. The day on which I made my first appearance downstairs was Wednesday ; the time evening ;—for it was judged better by the discreet Deborah that the younger fry should go to bed, and doors, windows, and shutters be closed before I was allowed to leave my room.

Saxon came up, and announced that he had a mission, namely, to carry me downstairs.

‘I can walk!’ I cried, in a feeble, wavering voice, at which he laughed, and by way of answer wrapped a large shawl around me. He stooped down to take me

in his arms, and I was struck with the fact of his looking such a great strong creature.

'Poor little lass!' he said, lifting me as if I had been a feather, and giving me a—for him—wonderfully gentle kiss.

Then he covered my head up and carried me off, so that when I emerged again I found myself in the well-known dining-room, and only Deb and Saxon with me. Tired even with that short pilgrimage, I collapsed, when fairly on my sofa, into a motionless bundle.

The fire glowed brightly. When they had settled me to their satisfaction, Saxon went away, and Deb was left alone with me. For the first time since the beginning of my illness I expressed some languid curiosity about some other beings than myself.

'Is Robin at home? And Bobby?' I inquired.

'Yes, but we must see how you feel before we let them in.'

Then I remembered Martin, but strange to say I felt no wish to ask after him, or indeed to know anything about him. In fact, I remembered him reluctantly, and simultaneously with his image there rose in my mind the reflection of that miserable, dark night, that wretched, mad expedition to Hoarbent Lodge, the remembrance of which made me feel hot all over. My detestation of that exploit and my shame in it were now as great as it was at first my desire to engage in it.

While I was uneasily thinking such thoughts, I perceived a shade between me and the firelight, and, on looking up, I found it to be caused by Martin himself. He was looking at me, but said nothing. I ought to have spoken to him—I knew I ought. What silly feeling prevented me from holding out my hand, and asking him if he were not glad to see me again? Not shyness—I did not feel shy, but a deep unwillingness that I could not conquer. So weak was I, that I could not even look very long at any one person or thing, and I presently turned my eyes away from

Martin, and began to contemplate my excessively bony fingers.

The shade vanished. Martin's retreating footsteps saluted my ear. He cast a backward glance at Deb, and said, morosely—

'I knew how it would be. She does not even care to look at me, only she will not say so.'

'Martin.'

He turned, and I extended my hand. He grasped it eagerly, and exclaimed in a broken voice—

'Oh, Betty, what a wretch I was! You poor, dear little thing! How you have suffered from my brutal selfishness!'

'Now, Martin!' came warningly from Deb.

'Then you have not been ill, Martin!'

'I? No! It is you who have had all the suffering.'

'Well, it is my own fault as much as yours. Do not ever let us speak about it again.'

I both spoke and felt very wearily.

'Never, if you don't choose. But you will try to forgive me some time?'

'Oh, there is nothing to forgive,' I managed to say, wishing that he would stop, and not seem so miserable.

He looked disappointed, and would have made further observations, but Deb came up, to my great relief, and authoritatively desired that the subject might be changed.

A week passed by, and I was supposed to be getting better rapidly. I came down some time during the morning, and got through the weary day as best I could. Deb was at her teaching all day, and did not return till towards five o'clock. We had only one maid now, large family though we were. Mother helped her, and was busy all day here and there, on household cares intent. The dear children, when they saw me make my appearance downstairs every day, concluded that I must be quite well, and went about their gentle play in their

usual manner, exceedingly glad that my illness had laid me on the shelf for a season, as it naturally gave them a holiday.

Deb entered the room one morning before going to her pupils; she carried a large bunch of grapes, two books, and a note.

‘There, Betty!’ said she, depositing the books and the grapes on the table, ‘those are for you. Mrs. Carston wants mother and me to go and have tea with her to-night.’

‘How very kind of Mrs. Carston to send me these,’ I remarked, gratefully, but more intent upon the books than the grapes. ‘Mrs. Browning? How delightful! How could she guess so well?’

Deb looked up from her note.

‘What about Mrs. Carston? It was not she who sent the things. They came from Mr. Entwistle. He sent a boy before breakfast. Very good of him, I am sure. They are beautiful grapes——’ breaking one off and eating it.

‘Mr. Entwistle! Why, does he know I have been ill?’

‘Yes. When you were so very ill, Martin was terribly cut up, because he considered it his fault, and mother and Saxon scarcely spoke to him. He left the house one morning, and did not return to dinner, nor yet to tea. We were rather uneasy, for he is such an odd boy; we could not tell what he might have done. About eight o’clock I was sitting here, and mother was with you, when who should walk in but Mr. Entwistle, with Martin. Poor Martin! He looked utterly miserable, for you know, Betty, we hardly thought you would get better then. Mr. Entwistle had only heard some vague report before, about your having a bad cold, but that day Martin had appeared before him at his house, before they had finished breakfast, I think, looking extremely wild, and saying he must go away; he could not stay to face people whom he had injured so much, and a

great deal more very high-flown nonsense. Mr. Entwistle of course knew nothing about your midnight excursion——'

'He never told him, Deb?'

'Of course! Mr. Entwistle calmed him down, and made him tell him the whole story. And then, I think, he lectured Martin, and said some rather severe things to him, though he was most kind, and you ought to think of this, Betty, when you are inclined to be thoughtless another time. He kept Martin with him all day——indeed, I don't think the unfortunate boy would ever have come back if Mr. Entwistle had not brought him. He was very kind. He must be a generous man—to be so kind, after Alizon——'

An abrupt pause. Deb reddened, bit her lip, and proceeded——

'After that, he sent every day to inquire how you were, and came himself, too. He certainly does not do things by half-and-half. Once or twice Mrs. Entwistle called too; and how kind she was! She saw you, but you never knew, for you were quite delirious, and she cheered mother immensely. Do you know'——here Deb smiled in spite of herself——'mother and she are quite like friends? Mother looked so much happier after Mrs. Entwistle had been. I never fancied she would have a friend. Somehow, Mrs. Entwistle would not let us think you were going to die——now, Betty, why must you begin to cry? I never saw any one so foolish,'——as I burst into tears, and made my escape to my own room.

Deb's history afforded me food for surmise and reflection during the whole day. What I most dwelt upon, however, were the words, 'after Alizon——' and the conscious look upon Deb's face as she caught herself up, after having uttered them. There was something behind it all, which I could not make out. All I felt certain about was, that it was a great pity Alizon did not appreciate Mr. Entwistle, and, with my usual rapid

and comprehensive grasp of the bearings of a subject, I straightway began to meditate writing a letter to my sister, wherein I should expatiate upon the noble qualities displayed by Hugh Entwistle and his mother, and should put it to Alizon's good feelings whether she could, after such kindness, still continue to dislike and depreciate him. Then I mentally glanced at the conduct of Martin, and his reported despair at my danger; I did not know of this before, and felt rather frightened when I realised what might have been the result of my folly. I would at once unbend towards Martin, and resume my old cordiality towards him. Since my illness, I had made no effort to shake off a certain stiffness and reserve which lay between us. So intensely did I hate to think of that night, and so vividly did the mere sight of Martin recall it to my mind, that I had avoided, as far as I could, even speaking to him. I would amend my ways; but I wished, oh! I did wish, as a sense of bitter shame and mortification swept over my mind, that I had laughed at Martin Lancaster, instead of listening to him in the schoolroom that night.

Having thus, as I thought, prospectively arranged things pleasantly, and by my good resolutions paved the way to a clear understanding and renewed happiness on the part of Martin and myself, I went downstairs leaving with stern self-denial those two enticing volumes on my dressing-table, in the hope that out of sight might also prove out of mind. Then I bravely summoned the young ones to begin lessons for the first time since my illness. They soon showed me my place. After a long series of insult and indignity heaped upon me, they, seeing that I trembled with nervousness and was utterly incapable of resisting them, seemed to go simply mad, and, tossing their books and slates in the air, saluted the horrid crash with which they fell to the ground with a yet more horrid shout; then, pointing at me with their fingers, and gaping upon me with their mouths, they cried, 'Yah! yah!' which I take to be

the juvenile modern equivalent for the 'Tush! tush!' of the Psalmist, in tones of the utmost scorn, after which they decamped without more ado. I cried my eyes out between futile rage and mortification, which brought on a violent headache, and for the rest of the afternoon I was wretched.

It would seem as if my woes upon this particular day were to have no end. Evening came, and with it mother and Deb took their departure to drink tea and spend the evening at the Vicarage, leaving me alone to cope with Johnny, Bobby, and Company. Tea was over, and we were all in the dining-room. Saxon betook himself to the window-seat, with a candle, by the aid of which he was enabled to conceal himself behind the curtain with a book of mechanics. I, for my part, had been waiting in the hope of carrying out some of my good resolutions and making it up with Martin, but as yet chance had not favoured my project.

He, Martin, looked darkly up now and then, from his book, casting glances of malignity upon my sweet brothers and sisters, engrossed in their childish sports. He would, I was sure, betake himself elsewhere ere long. Johnny and Bobby, under the wily pretext of joining Fanny and Clara in a game of play, were tormenting those young ladies in every conceivable way, as was amply testified by the incessant and high-pitched expostulations of their victims.

I, upon the old chintz-covered sofa, near the fire, was upon the very verge of bursting into tears of anguish, partly from nervousness, partly from sheer weakness and weariness, brought to a crisis by the infernal din going on around me. Every now and then I uplifted my voice in a weak and quavering protest, but the tumult raged on, unstilled and undiminished. I looked despairingly at the clock. It was, yes, it was their bed-time.

"Johnny!"

No reply.

‘Bobby!’

An expressive gesture of defiant contempt.

Ere long their gentle play assumed a new aspect, and an aggravated one. They collected all the footstools in the room, and assembling round them, pawed them over, with loud, uncouth noises. This was called playing at wild beasts, and appeared to me a too, too apt description.

‘Martin,’ I cried, in desperation, ‘do make them stop!’

Martin sprang up, and shouted very loudly, whirled Bobby round and round several times by his jacket-collar, and having thus succeeded in temporarily stunning him, boxed Johnny’s ears. Johnny immediately retaliated, tooth and nail. Fanny and Clara both began to cry at the very top of their voices.

This is too much; I weep too. My grief is not loud, but deep. At this moment I would give anything to be dead. And Saxon reads on as if utter stillness prevailed.

Suddenly the door separating this lively scene from the outer world opened, and Louisa, our one domestic, appeared. Apparently she spoke, her lips moved, but no sound was audible. She then gesticulated violently, and shook her fist at the boys. By this time Bobby had joined issue with Johnny; they were both throwing footstools at Martin with all their might, and the only articulate sound was, ‘Go it! Heave another at him!’ Through my tears, I perceived that Louisa disappeared, and that her form was replaced by another. The combatants saw it too, and in the twinkling of an eye there was a silence little less awful than the previous Babel.

Mr. Entwistle—oh, humiliation for me!—made his way to me, stooped over me, and said—

‘Miss Betty, I hope——’

And then he stopped, for I was crying heartily now, and my only answer to his greeting was—

'Oh, do send them away, please! They must go to bed, and I can't make them.'

How he did it I cannot tell, but in a miraculously short time, Bobby, Clara, and Fanny had gone peacefully away; and Johnny, with the casual remark that he would go and help Louisa to get supper ready, had left the room.

Martin, after a disdainful look around, and the curtest of greetings to Mr. Entwistle, took up his book and went away, palpably shrugging his shoulders as he did so.

Having dried my eyes with my moist handkerchief, I turned to my benefactor, feeling hot, red, and untidy. He had taken a chair close to my couch, and was looking gravely and, it seemed to me, pitifully at me.

'You must think us very rude; shamefully ill-behaved,' said I, in a feebly apologetic manner.

'I thought no such thing, but I do think you look worried to death almost. See! Let me put this cushion straight for you.'

'Oh, don't trouble with it—it will do perfectly well,' said I, quite shocked at being waited upon. But he persisted in rearranging cushions and rugs until I began to feel marvellously comfortable and easy. And then he sat down again.

'It was only the children,' I proceeded to explain. 'They were playing at wild beasts.'

'So I should suppose. And Martin—was he a wild beast too?'

'No. I only asked him to make them be quiet, and he boxed Johnny's ears. He does not understand children'—Mr. Entwistle stifled a smile—'and cannot bear them either.'

'Who or what is that?' asked Hugh, seeing Saxon's legs protruding from under the window-curtain.

'Only Saxon. He is reading about machinery, and plotting how to invent things, I daresay. Mother and Deb are at the Vicarage.'

After a pause, I proceeded—

‘Thank you so much for the grapes you sent this morning. It was so kind. And the books—how could you tell exactly what I should like?’

‘I am only glad I made a good guess. But you will never get strong enough to enjoy them if you are so worried.’

‘Oh, I am getting better every day now. You should have seen me a week ago.’

‘I am glad to see you under any circumstances. Your sister tells me you have been very ill.’

‘I suppose I have,’ said I, hanging my head, and blushing uncomfortably as I remembered the cause of that illness. I fondly hoped he would say nothing about that wretched business. But he did. His next remark was—

‘I felt sorry for Martin, but I judged it my duty to speak pretty severely to him. It was such gross thoughtlessness on his part.’

‘Why don’t you lecture me?’ I demanded, feeling rather like a sneak when I heard how Martin had been dropped upon. ‘It was more my fault than his. I never let him rest till he promised to take me. I begged him; yes, I implored him, to take me.’

‘You seem determined to criminate yourself thoroughly while you are about it,’ said Hugh, smiling indulgently, as he looked at my vexed and downcast countenance. ‘Martin ought to have had better sense than listen to a word you said. He wished you to go, and he was too selfish to make you do what was wise—the idea of taking a little delicate girl like you—What are you looking so astonished at?’

‘I did not know I was little, or—delicate,’ said I, flushing, I knew not why.

‘Did you not? I don’t absolutely mean little—small, or short, you know. There are some people whom one always thinks of and talks of as little—I am afraid Martin is rather possessed with a sense of his own talents and importance.’

'But I was wrong too,' I cried. 'And I have been rightly served. I deserved all I got.'

'Well,' said he, kindly, but gravely, 'you would not do it again, I am sure. You did not foresee the consequences, did you?'

Then, seeing the look of misery and shame upon my face, he added—

'And don't you think you have spent about enough remorse upon the subject? I know it can never be a pleasant memory—but all people do foolish things at some period or other of their lives.'

'You never did anything so foolish as that,' said I, quickly.

'No, my dear child. What you did that night was as the wisdom of Solomon compared with what I once did.'

His face reddened, yet he smiled too.

'Ah, when you were a mere child, perhaps,' said I, sceptically.

'Not two years ago,' was the emphatic answer.

'Then you don't think I was very, very unusually foolish?' I demanded, not raising my eyes, for fear of finding him laughing at me.

'Well, I cannot imagine any one but you doing it. I will tell you the truth. The whole affair is less important than you suppose.' Oh! humiliating and veracious counsellor. 'If you had succeeded; if the sleet had not come; if the moon had shone all the time; if you had not lost your way on the moor——'

'Oh, don't!' I groaned.

'It was but a childish freak,' he continued, with an amused smile.

'I hate to be thought a child. I am almost grown up.'

'Why should you wish to be grown up?' he asked, in a tone of the most genuine surprise.

I made no answer, but I suddenly realised that Hugh Entwistle would not have lectured—Alizon, say

—as he had been lecturing me. Of course he had behaved to me ever since he knew me as a man of seven or eight-and-twenty would behave to a spoilt, wilful child who amused him, and whom he rather liked. Well, he had excellent cause to do so. What more he might have said I know not. Supper was at that moment brought in, by the united exertions of Louisa and Johnny, who affectionately pressed Mr. Entwistle to stay, adding that he had prepared cocoa on purpose for him.

‘Cocoa, you know,’ he said. ‘“Breakfast; warm, grateful, comforting.” It’s that sort of cocoa, but we have it for supper. Do stay!’

On my joining my invitation to that of Johnny, Hugh consented to remain. Saxon emerged from his corner, greeted the guest with urbane astonishment, and immediately departed, to bring home his mother and sister. Martin was called, and made his appearance, looking exceedingly sulky. Evidently his retirement had not improved his temper, and his behaviour annoyed and made me uncomfortable, the more so as I was quite at a loss to conjecture the meaning of it. He scarcely spoke to Mr. Entwistle, but glared at him in what was to me quite an unaccountable manner. Johnny proved himself after all a good fellow. He only informed us how much cocoa he allowed to each cup, and how he and Louisa had wondered whether Mr. Entwistle would stay supper, and how Louisa hoped he would, and cheer Miss Betty up a bit (Hugh gave me an odd glance, as if not sure that his visit had had the desired effect), and how Mr. Lancaster ought——

Here even Johnny paused.

‘Well?’ demanded Martin, defiantly.

‘Don’t you wish you knew?’ said my brother, tauntingly, and the rest of us looked uncomfortable.

Immediately after supper Hugh departed.

‘Oh, Johnny, how can you behave in such a manner? What must Mr. Entwistle think?’ I began, in deep tones of annoyance. Johnny replied with a scoff.

'And, Martin, I think you might have behaved better. Mr. Entwistle must have thought you very rude.'

'Let him! Conceited ape!'

'Conceited!' cried I, with a scornful kind of laugh.

'I suppose you are speaking of yourself?'

'I'm speaking of Hugh Entwistle.'

'Then you never made a greater mistake in your life. You are conceited, if you like. He is a gentleman, and there is nothing conceited about him.'

Then, without further remark, I marched off to my room. Arrived there, I realised, with a sense of dismay, that so far from healing my misunderstanding with Martin Lancaster, I had transformed it into a downright quarrel. I had insulted him, and called him conceited. I was sure that Martin would not easily forgive me—for I should not easily ask him to do so.

CHAPTER XVII

I HERE insert a letter which came about this time from Alizon to Deb, although I did not see it, or know its contents, until long afterwards :—

‘MY DEAR DEB—Ralph is here now. I was very glad when he came, but I shall be still more so when he goes away. He teases me. I wish he wouldn't. But I must tell you all about what he told me one day when I went for a walk with him beside the river.

‘We had been walking for a long time, and sat down to rest in a field by the river. It was very beautiful. I can hardly make you Hamerton people understand the richness of the woods, and the melancholy veil of haze which curtains everything here. To me, wooded landscapes always look sad. But the river flows so placidly, and all looks so rich and prosperous and well-to-do, unlike our bare ridges with a few dirty sheep and gray farmhouses dispersed about them.

‘We had been sitting in silence for some time, when I suddenly bethought myself that as Ralph was tired, and lazy, and good-humoured, this would be a good opportunity of getting to know something I was curious about.

“Ralph,” said I, beginning warily, “why do you never mention what sport you have had when you come in from the covers? You never mention shooting; you never say anything about the season and the birds. You

are a man, and I do not understand your unnatural reticence upon such a subject."

"Nobody ever speaks of those things here."

"But why? Does Mr. Labatt hate sport so intensely?"

"He would not touch a gun now, at any price, but he used to be one of the keenest sportsmen that ever lived. At least I have heard so. Never saw him shoot myself."

"What made him leave off?"

"Do you not know the history?"

"I? No; how should I? But if it is not wrong, I wish you would tell me, for I am always putting my foot into it on some matter connected with this shooting."

"Did you never wonder why neither Mr. nor Miss Labatt were married?"

"No, no. So many people do not get married now, and I could not imagine him in that state of life. He is simply a scientific and philosophic machine, and if he had a wife she would be a miserable woman, and he would be a yet more miserable man. As for Miss Delia—no; she is an old maid, although she is not prim, and does not keep a cat."

"You know the solemn way in which Ralph looks at you if you say anything he does not like, or thinks not quite proper. He looked at me in that way then, and said—

"That shows that you do not know their history, Alizon. Many years ago, when Mr. Labatt was a young man, and his sister about four-and-twenty, they had an elder brother. His name was Edgar, and Reginald was deeply attached to him. Edgar Labatt was engaged to marry the daughter of the Rector, Rhoda Spencer; she and Miss Labatt were like sisters, and Miss Spencer was about one-and-twenty. At the same time the senior curate here was Mr. Lancaster." How startled I was, Deb, to hear this! "He was a handsome, conceited, rather clever young fellow"—like his son, Deb, in the

second qualification—"and he came very often to the Labatts, and was very attentive to Miss Labatt.

"One 10th of September, the two Labatts and some friends had gone out shooting in the morning, and Miss Spencer was spending the day with Miss Labatt at Oaklands. The day before, Reginald Labatt had given a curious Chinese fan to his brother's *fiancée*, and she and Miss Labatt were talking about it. She stood in the drawing-room, at the long window, waving it about, and laughing, when they saw some men coming up the lane, carrying some one. They stood watching them, and the men came into the garden, up to the front door. It was Edgar Labatt whom they were carrying, and his brother had accidentally shot him. How it was I forget exactly, but there were several witnesses, keepers and friends, and it was of course proved beyond a doubt to have been pure accident. He was quite dead."

"Ralph paused, and I could not speak. Poor Mr. Labatt! How I pity him!

"After that," went on Ralph, "troubles came fast upon them. Reginald nearly went out of his mind. He had brain fever, and has been eccentric ever since. When he recovered, he used to haunt Miss Spencer's presence, watching her, almost without speaking. As for her—she must have been a flippant, shallow, kind of woman, a mere coquette, for, after the first shock, she used to encourage poor Mr. Labatt's attentions. Of course, on his brother's death, he had inherited all the Oaklands estate, and was a rich man. She tried to flirt with him, and would certainly have married him if he had asked her. She never understood him—never could comprehend why he would no more think of asking her to marry him than of asking a picture of the Madonna to marry him.

"Mr. Lancaster continued a constant visitor at Oaklands, and his attentions to Miss Labatt were remarked by everyone. Whether she loved him, who can tell?

It is all such a miserable business that one hates to think of it.

“Things went on in this way for some time, till, to the astonishment of every one, Mr. Lancaster and Miss Spencer declared themselves engaged. The Spencers were indignant, and refused their consent. Miss Labatt expostulated with the girl she thought her friend, and did all she could to dissuade her from so foolish a match. All she got in return was insult and unkindness. Lancaster and Miss Spencer anticipated their friends’ opposition by eloping and getting married. Her father and mother are both dead since then. For a long time the young couple were very poor, very quarrelsome, and very unhappy, until at last Mr. Labatt procured for Mr. Lancaster the incumbency in the east of London which he now has. Mrs. Lancaster died some years ago, and I believe there are eight children, of whom Martin is the eldest.”

“Oh, Ralph!” said I, “how wretched that those two good people should have been made so perfectly miserable. It is not right; no, it is not right.”

‘Ralph sighed, and said, “Alizon, we generally think that what we like is right, and what we dislike is wrong.”

‘I was greatly amazed to hear Ralph philosophising. Since when has he begun to do it? Can you tell me?

‘We got up to walk home, and to my horror Ralph began, as we were going through the field, to ask, in a very sentimental tone, if I were happy here.

‘“Perfectly happy,” said I, telling as large a lie with as much emphasis as I could.

‘“I wish,” said he, “that you were not always so cheerful, and satisfied, and contented. It gives me no chance of making way.”

‘“Ralph,” I said, very solemnly, “I am a very contented and a very unfeeling person, as you must surely have found out before now. I’m like the Miller of the Dee, caring for nobody, no not I. You must not be vexed,” I added, seeing how down he looked. “I

cannot help my nature. I do not care for people. There is no one in the world that I love very much—except, perhaps, poor little Betty. I don't believe I can love very much; consequently I am certain to be both lucky and happy on my way through life."

"Alizon!"

"It is true," I said, more and more decidedly; "please God, I'll sing the same song to my life's end—I, like Miss Labatt, will be an old maid, but I will not care for people as much as she has done. Do you see?"

"Alizon," he began, so solemnly that I could hardly keep from laughing, though I felt sorry for the poor fellow, "the time will come when you will be thankful for one grain of the love that you sneer at now."

"I don't sneer at you—Heaven forbid!" cried I, quite shocked.

"No, you do worse. You sneer at the very name of that without which life would be miserable—at Love; and you will repent it—yes, some day you will repent it."

"I had not meant to raise such a storm. Why will Ralph be so tiresomely in earnest about things? But I am glad I had the explanation with him; he has never teased me, and never paid me any compliments since; he has only looked at me mournfully, and soon, I hope, he will look a final look, and go away. I like being here best when there are no visitors.

'ALIZON.'

CHAPTER XVIII

CHRISTMAS drew near, and our rainy season only gathered in severity. Alizon was to come home on the 23d, for ten days, and my desire to see her was augmented by the fact that I had not yet been out of doors, nor did there appear to be any prospect of my going at present. How I longed to feel the fresh air blowing upon my cheeks, which cheeks, as I clearly perceived, and as my brethren candidly informed me, continued extremely meagre and colourless.

At last the day of Alizon's arrival dawned, and I hailed it with joy. It would be late in the afternoon before she could come; in fact, when Saxon, Bobby, and Martin set off to meet her it was already dark. But she came at last, and when tea was over we all gathered together in the drawing-room around the fire, Alizon having forbidden candles, as she said we could talk so much better in the twilight.

She look very well and cheerful, but graver than of yore; and now and then displayed a little absence of manner for which I could not account to myself, except by reminding myself that all three sisters, Deb, Alizon and I, were sobered down since last June.

We had sat silent for some time, having discussed the question of church-decorations, which Alizon said were a bore; I gave it as my opinion that I did not mind that, so that I saw some one to talk to; and Alizon said, 'Pooh!' as if she felt superior to all need of society.

'It is a good while since Mr. Entwistle was here,' observed Johnny, who had been seated on the hearthrug, at Alizon's feet, listening to our talk and looking, with his bright gray eyes and earnest little face, into the fire. 'A long time—don't you think so, Betty?'

'Mr. Entwistle!' fell from Alizon's lips, as she looked around, flushed and startled. 'What do you mean? He never comes here.'

'Oh, don't he, though!' growled Martin, looking maliciously and angrily at me, while Johnny, clasping his hands round his knees, went on—

'He has been often. He came one night while mother and Deb were at the Vicarage, and we were playing wild beasts. Betty was crying. He sent all the children to bed, and stayed a long time. I gave him cocoa for supper. And he has been since then. He comes to see Betty.'

Alizon looked at me in an unusual way, and Deb interposed—

'Nonsense! He was very kind, and so was Mrs. Entwistle, when Betty was ill.'

'Oh yes! He lent Betty a lot of books,' went on Johnny, perceiving that his remarks were not quite welcome, and anxious to embarrass us a little more if he could.

'There is a tea-party at the schoolroom next week,' said Deb, raising her voice, and giving a menacing look at Johnny. 'Sydney has a tray, and she wants us to go and help her.'

'I say,' said Robin, 'let us all go! What a lark it would be! Martin, were you ever at a Lancashire tea-fight?'

'No, never.'

'Then we'll go. They have recitations and readings afterwards. Suppose'—he fixed a wary eye on Martin, and spoke as if the thought had just struck him—'suppose you read something, Martin. I can tell you

it would make a sensation. Any stranger makes a sensation here. You might teach them something new. Bless you, they don't know what these things might be made if intelligent people had the management of them. Some poetry, for instance,' continued Robin, leaning confidentially towards him; 'some real poetry, I mean—not Lancashire dialect. I am going to sing in "God bless thee, my son Robin!" and I know a man who's going to sing, "Come whoam to thi childer and me!"'

He paused, and to my surprise Martin lent an attentive ear to the proposal. I knew that Robin was laughing at him, and that nothing would give him greater satisfaction than to hear Martin spouting heroic poetry to the audience which would assemble on Saturday night. He saw that the victim eyed the bait lovingly, so he plied him with further persuasions, not that he disliked Martin, but he longed to see him make a fool of himself. Johnny drew nearer; I saw him and Robin exchange something like a wink. Once how I should have delighted to circumvent them, and expose their wiles to my friend. But now I watched it all with deep indifference. Let Martin be made a fool of! I did not care. Our quarrel had never yet been made up; we were on speaking terms and outwardly amiable—no more. *Medora* lay unfinished in a drawer. Sometimes I would scan its stormy pages, and sigh as I remembered the length of each happy summer day when it was being planned and begun.

CHAPTER XIX

IN Hamerton, as in all the rest of Lancashire, we could do nothing without a tea-party. This particular tea-party was one of extra importance and magnitude. It appertained to the manners and customs of the 'Church Institution,' and was patronised by all the beauty, wealth, and talent in the neighbourhood, not to mention the swarms of other people—

‘ Men and boys,
The matron and the maid,’

and the child in arms, and the child in every variety of noise, hunger, and greed into the bargain.

The tea-party was held in the church schoolroom, a long, low, but spacious building, with a great capacity for getting very hot without much cause.

We all, except mother, had come to the tea-party; yes, even I, Betty. This dissipation had been procured for me by the kindness of Ralph, who, when he heard me expressing my strong yet hopeless desire to be present, said I should go, and sent Sydney's brougham for me, after it had taken her to the schoolroom, promising that it should also convey me home again.

It was quite a dress affair, this tea-party, and the temperature of a height to warrant cool and airy attire. The festivities commenced at 4.30 p.m. There were many long tables, each end of each table being provided with a capacious tea-urn, with two spouts. Some competent person presided over each urn, and was

attended by two boys, or young men, as waiters. They were willing and solicitous, if not artistic, in their work.

Sydney was at one end of the first table, and I sat beside her and helped her. We knew we had work before us, and our waiters were Robin and Bobby. Mrs. Carston was at the other end, with two tall and able-bodied young men, a bass and a tenor from the choir, to help her. Alizon and Deb, at the next table, had Johnny and Saxon, and the feast was at its height. We each had to supply, on an average, five tablefuls of tea-drinkers and cake-eaters. Each individual of each relay ate and drank a mean amount of three large cups of tea, very weak, very sweet, and very well creamed. Each too on an average consumed one plate and a half of bread and butter, plum-cake, which we at Hamerton always called 'currant bread,' and 'mowffin,' a generic name for tea-bread in all its varieties. As each fresh instalment appeared, the cups used by their predecessors were shoved gaily to the front, filled, and sent down again, without any intervening process.

The conversation was loud, cheerful, and continuous, and our customers displayed a most urbane and friendly spirit towards their caterers. Our toil was unremitting for fully two hours, by which time the room was dim with the steam of hot tea, fragrant with the condensed perfume of pomatum, boots, and velveteen. I employed my leisure time in making notes on the costume and appearance of the company. *Place aux dames!* The women were one and all arrayed in a style of brilliancy not to be described, hardly imagined, by one who has not the data of former experience to go upon. It was Christmas time, so they were attired according to what that season ought to be, not what it actually was; that is, in winter dresses, thick jackets and shawls; neckties round their throats, and bonnets on their heads; bonnets wherein the lily and the rose would be a sorry figure in comparison with the *parterres*, lively in hue

and variegated in tint, which were heaped on every head, above the inevitable chignon. They smiled on bravely, despite every disadvantage of atmosphere and costume, and indeed were too busily discussing their neighbours and exchanging chaff with the young men of their acquaintance to feel seriously incommoded.

The gentlemen's attire offered a smaller field for variety; but if they could not have it in parti-coloured coats or nether garments, they took it out in neckties, of which I beheld and duly admired a truly brilliant assortment.

Tea being at last over, a most ferocious bustle instantly began. I felt my pleasure to be only commencing, and, looking about me, found that Alizon and Deb had disappeared. Therefore I slipped away from Sydney, and took my path through the crowd in search of my relatives. At last I found them in a dark recess near the door, where, in company with others who had waited at table and poured out the tea, they were having an impromptu meal on their own account.

Alizon and Deb were there, joining at a plate and teacup, and talking to some tall Sunday scholars. Robin, Bobby, Saxon, and Johnny were devouring 'mowffin' with vigour.

'Oh, have you got clean cups and plates!' I inquired.

'Yes,' said Bobby; 'here's one for you. Begin as soon as you like.'

As I had only waited for the invitation, I immediately sat down, and, in the interval of my meal, asked—

'When is Martin coming? Does any one know? I do hope he has not turned bashful at the last moment.'

'Not he!' said Robin. 'He's getting himself up now as a great swell; I left him at it.'

With this Robin and Johnny disappeared, and I did not see them again at present. Refreshed with my tea,

I leaned against the wall and looked on. My eye fell upon Alizon. She looked pale, weary, and indifferent—she who used to enter so thoroughly into the fun of a gathering of this kind. I reasoned within myself that Alizon was certainly changed, and wondered remotely what could have wrought the alteration.

The door near which I was standing opened, and several people came in, Martin Lancaster first. He had a volume under his arm. What could he be going to declaim?

Mr. Carston, the clergyman, Ralph Bamford, and Hugh Entwistle were amongst those who followed Martin. Shaking off the torpor which threatened to overcome me, I sat up to watch the proceedings of my acquaintance.

Ralph, as soon as he entered, saw Alizon and Deb, and, flatteringly unconscious of any other presence, made his way directly to them. It would seem that Mr. Entwistle's eyes did not roam so far, for he stopped short by me and shook hands with me.

'You here, Miss Betty? I am glad to see you. Allow me to congratulate you on your return to society.'

'Thanks. I am enjoying myself immensely. I was so tired of being in the house always, and it has rained rather more than usual this winter.'

'I hope some one has been looking after you. Have you had some tea?'

'Oh yes—— Mr. Entwistle, are you going to read anything, or sing anything, or act anything?'

'What should make you think such a thing?'

'Ralph is going to make a speech, Martin is going to read, and Robin to sing; why should not you distinguish yourself too?'

'I believe I am in for a speech towards the end of the meeting. Perhaps I shall escape. Promise me that if awake at the time, you will not criticise too severely.'

'Oh, I should never think of criticising you.'

'Indeed! I imagined that a lady who wrote tragedies——'

'You promised, Mr. Entwistle, you promised!' I cried, in mortal fear, as I remembered that Martin was near.

'I promised never to make fun of it!' he answered, regarding me with a smile, which smile did not quite reassure me; but, remembering that he had always hitherto proved himself an indulgent kind of person, I said, lowering my voice in confidential entreaty—

'I know, and it was very good of you to say that; but, oh! Mr. Entwistle, if you would only promise never to mention it again!'

'Indeed, I shall not! One never knows the end of such promises as that.'

'Then I will criticise your speech.'

'Pray do! If the criticisms are valuable, I will model my next speech upon them.'

Convinced that he was laughing at me, I said, very rapidly and angrily—

'You need not make fun of me, if you do of that thing; though I daresay I am silly, and it may be very amusing to you.'

Thereupon I promptly turned my back upon him, and instantly began a conversation with Mary Butterworth, one of Deb's Sunday scholars. Of course Hugh, even if he would, could say nothing more to me, and he turned away, after bestowing a look, half-doubtful, half-amused, upon me. I had the satisfaction of feeling that I had been very rude to a person who had been very kind to me, and whom I liked, and I did not suppose that he would ever speak again to such a pettish child as I had just proved myself. Meditating thus, I heard no word of Mary's, after her first.

'Well, Miss Betty, I'st gradely glad to see you about again.'

I was watching Hugh, who, first looking up the schoolroom, and then at Deb and Alizon, turned to

them. Deb's taciturn face unbent a little as she spoke to him. What would Alizon do? When he spoke to her she made a haughty little bow, and spoke in a studiously cold and ungracious manner. She did not give him time for any conversation, but, just allowing him to finish his remark, interrupted—

'If we mean to get any places, we must get them now,' and therewith, before either he or Deb could speak, she was gone, had passed the screen dividing this part of the room from the other, and marched alone to the upper forms. Deb looked downcast and embarrassed, turned this way and that, and looked at any one but Mr. Entwistle.

'Well,' thought I, in a parenthesis, 'I should hope he is delighted with the perfect good-breeding of the oldest family in Hamerton.'

He looked for a moment after Alizon, and then, turning to Deb, said gravely—

'Your sister is right. Shall we go, and I will find you a seat?'

Deb and I followed him without a word. As I traversed the narrow path between the ends of the benches and the wall, my dress was suddenly plucked at from behind. Turning, I found that Robin detained me. He seemed choking with laughter, and leaning forward from his seat, he pointed to Martin, who was laboriously making his way from one end of a crowded bench towards the platform.

Robin winked. 'Take notice of that promising young man, Betty. He thinks no small beer of himself just now, but wait—only wait.'

Shrugging my shoulders, I made the best of my way after Hugh and Deborah, and found that my sisters and Sydney were upon the front bench before the platform. Mrs. Carston too was there, and close behind us were the Misses Mounsey, arrayed for the occasion in the perennial green bonnets and tall combs.

Soon afterwards the business of the evening com-

menced. I perceived Martin on the platform, seated apart in haughty silence, clasping his volume to his heart. He looked disdainfully down his nose at an honest chorister-boy beside him. Certainly Martin had not a happy manner with those whom he considered his inferiors. Why should he disdain that boy? I knew him to be a respectable boy—a good boy—and I felt indignant.

The usual ceremonies then took place. Mr. Carston made a speech, and said something pleasant of everybody, and then the choir sang a glee, and sang it well. Then came a reading. One of the choristers, smiling bashfully, was urged forward by his fellows, and gave us ‘Th’ Barrel Organ,’ in the dialect, eliciting thereby roars of laughter from the appreciative audience.

Another glee; then Martin arose, coming to the front, with his book open. I burned to know what he had chosen. Could it be a scene from Shakespeare: ‘Friends, Romans, Countrymen!’ or from *Hamlet*: ‘King, Father, Royal Dane!’ Could it be Scott, Wordsworth or Byron? Tennyson or Browning?

Heavens! He opened the book and announced it as a number of Mr. Ruskin’s periodical *Fors Clavigera*; and he began to read a mystical disquisition on the nature of money.

For a time there was the silence that is inspired by awe and wonder; the natives were not sure that they were not being favoured with something sacred—perhaps a lost chapter of Revelations, or a translation of the inscription on the Moabite stone; but at last came from the background an emphatic ‘Hear! hear!’ I knew the voice—it was Johnny’s—and I trembled. From this moment applause came on constantly, and always in the wrong place; loud and long* was it. The audience seemed to snatch at the joke, and joined in heartily whenever Robin and Johnny gave them a lead.

By and by came in broad Lancashire a remonstrance—

‘Eh, mon ! Cut it short, wiltea ?’

But I recognised Robin’s voice, and Martin began to suspect something. The loud laughter of the audience was too pointed, for in what he read them there was certainly no cause for mirth. His lips got rather thin and his eyebrows descended sullenly. I saw Hugh listening with an amused smile, which he considerably tried to suppress, while Ralph unaffectedly stifled a yawn, and Sydney wondered audibly, ‘What could the boy have been thinking about to choose such a rignarole for such an audience.’

Finally Martin did cut it short, and stopped. He could not complain that he was insufficiently applauded, and I distinguished the voices of my brothers above all the others.

Nothing further occurred that was noteworthy, unless I except the fact that when we were muffling ourselves up for departure, Miss Martha Mounsey, tapping me on the shoulder, said—

‘I’m glad you are able to come out again. Myself and sisters have felt very much for your dear mamma during your illness. I hope you will take care of yourself in the future, my dear.’

Much confused at this mark of attention from one of whom I had often said malicious things, my acknowledgments were of the most meagre description, and Miss Martha hurried off after ‘sisters.’

Sydney sent me home in the carriage, and thus ended my first dissipation after my illness.

CHAPTER XX

ALIZON returned to Haythorpe two days after the tea-party. On the morning of her departure she and I happened to be alone in the drawing-room. She had finished packing-up, and was waiting until it was time to go, while I was perusing a local newspaper.

I had been deeply interested in a lively and vituperative correspondence between two of the local magnates on the subject of disestablishment, and looking up from my paper saw Alizon take a book from the table. It was one of the volumes of Mrs. Browning's poems which Hugh had lent me. She looked absently at it and then turned the leaves back to the title-page. I, from behind my broadsheet, gave my best attention to her proceedings. I knew she was studying the page whereon was inscribed, 'II. Entwistle.' She gazed at it a long time, and finally turned over the pages again, with a certain setting of her lips and eyebrows, in a line the reverse of good-humoured.

I lowered my newspaper, and looked at her inquiringly, as if I had not witnessed any of the previous byplay.

'What have you got, Alizon? Mrs. Browning? Oh, wasn't it kind in Mr. Entwistle to lend it me?'

'Humph!' was the sole response.

'I think,' proceeded I, deliberately, 'that he is so nice and so kind. I like him better than Ralph. He is so much cleverer.'

'Young people are always in a rage for the last novelty.'

After considering a short time, curiosity got the better of discretion, and I continued—

‘As for you, Alison, I don’t know why you dislike him. At the tea-party the other night you would hardly speak to him. What is the meaning of it?’

Alison shut up her book, and looked straight at me.

‘Betty,’ she said, in a hard, dry voice, ‘you are a little over sixteen, and therefore very ignorant, and very enthusiastic. I am not very old, but I do know a little more than you, and I will give you a short piece of advice. Do not be so ready to extol the gentlemen of your acquaintance in that indiscriminating manner. What is more, do not praise one above all others, and what is most of all, child, do not let your head be turned by what you call Mr. Entwistle’s “kindness.” Remember, Betty, you are but a child in his eyes; don’t get into a flirtation with him. It would do you no good, and would merely amuse him. I can see he is very much amused with you. Take my advice, or you will rue it some day.’

Then, looking at the clock, she added, ‘It is time for me to get ready now,’ and so left me.

I sat still, staring at the chair in which Alison had been sitting; and as the meaning of her words dawned more clearly upon me, I felt my face grow furiously hot, and scalding tears started to my eyes. But they did not fall. Before there was time for that I had lost all desire for weeping. I felt a kind of cold anger, and my pride—I found for the first time that I was proud—was most bitterly wounded. I swallowed down my tears, and felt that I could not force myself to smile, whatever might be given me. For a moment my mind reverted to Hugh Entwistle, and I wished, as I covered my face with my hands, that I might never see him again. I trusted I never should. I felt glad that I had quarrelled with him on Saturday night. How could I have conducted myself that Alison should have said such things to me?

'Very much amused with me,' was he? Then something was certainly wrong. No girl should behave so that people may be 'very much amused' with her. In the first blush of shame and confusion, I felt the whole universe to be out of joint. My dream, in which I had been living, had been very pleasant—too pleasant; if I had been doing wrong all the time, and had never known it, I had been awakened with no gentle hand. My sister might have spoken the truth—she might even have spoken the truth in love; if so, both truth and love were things with which I desired no further acquaintance. Never before had I offered my cheek to Alizon to kiss without also kissing her heartily in return, but on her departure that day I could not be affectionate. My hand lay still for her to shake, and though she kissed me, I did not kiss her.

About a week later, Deb and I were seated in the dining-room one morning when a visitor—that unusual thing at our house—was announced. My emotions were varied and lively on hearing her style and title—'Mrs. Entwistle.'

Deb, with her usual presence of mind, received the visitor while I was recovering from my surprise. I had been on slight speaking terms with Mrs. Entwistle all my life, and was perfectly familiar with her good-natured, happy face, and with her coat of many colours—if one may use such an expression for the *tout ensemble* of a lady's dress. We all knew Mrs. Entwistle, but our families had never been on visiting terms before. After the first greetings had passed, she remarked, in a kindly, loud voice—

'It's easy to see you've been ill, my dear. Eh, but you were in a way when I saw you last. There was little to encourage hope that you'd ever get better. But, thank God, you've pulled through this time.'

As I did not quite know what to say in answer to this address, Mrs. Entwistle went on—

'I've come to ask you to do me a favour. I spoke

to Miss Bamford about it the other day and said I didn't wish to ask too much, but she advised me to try.'

A pause.

'I shall be glad to do anything I can, I am sure,' I answered, much amazed.

'Well you see, I've had my rheumatism very bad, along of this damp weather, and as it doesn't seem likely to be any finer, not yet awhile, I said to 'Ugh last week, I said, "I reely must get away from here, or I shall be doubled up." He said, "Oh, mother, that would never do." And I don't like them very fashionable places, like Buxton, and there, so I'm going to my old place, Southport—it always does me most good of anywhere—and Hugh is so very busy he won't be able to come and see me. So you see——'

She looked smilingly at Deb and me. We did not in the least understand what she meant, so we both said, 'Yes?' in a polite and inquiring manner.

'So I asked Miss Bamford if she thought Mrs. Howarth would allow little Miss Betty'—oh, the raging indignation that filled my bosom! Little Miss Betty, forsooth!—'to come with me, that is, if you don't mind the company of an old woman, which will be rather dull society for a lively young girl.' Just the very thing I most hated to be thought. Poetical girls are never lively. 'For I said, "Miss Betty 'as been ill, choosehow, and perhaps Southport would set her up a little; and at any rate, it can't do her any harm," and I says, "I'll look after her; trust me for that!"'

Mrs. Entwistle stopped, and it would be hard to say which of my conflicting feelings had the mastery at this great moment. I wished to go to Southport. I had never been anywhere beyond the neighbouring town of Bolton since I was a very small child, and Southport was to me what 'the Continent' might be to more travelled young women. But to go with Hugh Entwistle's mother! True, he would ~~not~~ intrude on our privacy—she said so.

I found she was looking at me, waiting for my answer, while I racked my brains to think of some polite way of declining the offered honour, for, upon the whole, I thought the pains would be greater than the pleasures connected with it. At that juncture mother came in, and Deb related what had passed, saying that Mrs. Entwistle had 'been so very kind as to ask Betty,' etc. etc. Mother did not even cast a glance towards her trembling child to ascertain what might be her feelings in the matter, but said, promptly—

'You are exceedingly kind, Mrs. Entwistle. It is just what I should have done for her myself if I could have afforded it. It will do her a world of good, and I hope she will do all she can'—with a warning glance at me—'to make herself useful, and show her gratitude.'

'Eh, no gratitude!' said the good-natured creature. 'I hope Miss Betty won't find me a very dull companion, and I am much obliged to you for letting her come.'

Further conversation ensued, in which I took no part, but from which I learnt that Mrs. Entwistle proposed setting off for her favourite watering-place in the course of a few days. Finding my fate thus arbitrarily settled, I made no more resistance, well knowing that it would be worse than useless to do so.

Early the following week, Mrs. Entwistle, her trunk, bandbox, bags, paper parcels, umbrellas, my modest luggage and myself, were safely landed in that favourite Lancashire resort—Southport.

CHAPTER XXI

THE present might be called my first visit to Southport, for though I had, years ago, visited the place, I could not in the least remember it, and its manifold charms had for me all the attractions of novelty. Mrs. Entwistle, who liked to see what was going on—as who would not that lived at Hamerton—had taken lodgings in the principal street.

She had chosen a truly lively situation—perhaps one might even say that it was of the shop, shoppy, for it was above a fancy repository—near the promenade, the pier, and the chief cabstand. Thus our situation combined every advantage that a situation—in Southport—could have.

When we had been established in our abode for a week, I was enjoying myself very much. Our days were spent somewhat as follows: Mrs. Entwistle, not being addicted to the vice of early rising, did not breakfast until the easy hour of 'from nine to half-past'—or thereabouts. When breakfast was over, and Mrs. Entwistle had read the Births, Marriages, and Deaths, looked out for the murders, suicides, and railway accidents, and glanced at the summary of the 'Trial at Bar of the Claimant to the Tichborne Baronetcy and Estates'—for it was in that halcyon period that we visited Southport—we put on our things, if the weather were fine, which it usually was, and sallying forth, performed the day's marketing. Coming home again, we stopped at every shop-window of any importance in Lord Street, and, to

quote Alizon, 'flattened our noses' against the panes of two or three special favourites. We had no sense of looking countryfied or indecent by indulging in such behaviour; we loved to price the things, and would read aloud, in admiring tones, from the tickets, 'very cheap two shillings,'—in very large figures—'and elevenpence halfpenny'—in very small ones—and remark how cheap everything was—or seemed to be. If we had time, we walked a little upon the promenade afterwards, and I amused myself by watching the people, and wishing that I had a sealskin jacket, like everybody else in this prosperous place.

The pleasant, soft sea-breeze did me a great deal of good. I gathered health and strength every day, though Mrs. Entwistle lamented that I yet looked very thin, and had very colourless cheeks.

At half-past one of the clock we always dined, and if feeding-up and hospitable pressing to 'make a good meal, dear—growin' girls take a good deal of filling-up,' could have made me strong and muscular, I should soon have been a giant.

Dinner over, Mrs. Entwistle again took up the newspaper, with the idea, perhaps, of bringing a mind strengthened by eating and exercise to bear upon the more abstruse portions of the news. She had always most sincere intentions of hard study when she sat down, for she said, 'Hugh is so fond of talking of such like things, and I do like to listen to him, when I can understand what it's all about,' but it all came to nothing. She would get through a portion of the 'Tichborne Case,' and then the paper gradually dropped. After a few abortive attempts to pull it up and read it, 'she sleeps; my lady sleeps.'

Then came almost the pleasantest part of my day.

I took my book from the circulating library, to which Mrs. Entwistle had nobly subscribed on my behalf, to the window, and placing myself in a low chair in it, I enjoyed about an hour of the truest, deepest luxury.

My book was in my hand, and I could read as uninterruptedly as I chose;—or there was the outside world to gaze upon at will—the women at the corner, selling shrimps; the cabmen on the stand, talking or sleeping; the passers-by in every variety of gentility, vulgarity, complacency, and self-importance. There were the schools—any number of them—particularly one very long string of young ladies, who always passed at the same time, and in the same order, and were always met at the same spot by the same three highly-dressed, brilliantly-tied and gloved dandies, who, with one accord, flourished three canes, lifted three hats, and made three bows to two pretty girls about the middle of the procession, and who then passed on, calmly ignoring the scowls of the principal and the two governesses at the end of the file.

When Mrs. Entwistle had awakened, and had had a sufficient interval in which to realise her situation, she used suddenly to sit up, put her cap straight, and say, in accents of much surprise—

‘Why, Betty, my dear, I do believe I’ve been dozing.’

Then we put on our things again, and went out upon the promenade and the pier. This last was always the event of my day. To get to the end of the pier was my great desire, and was what I had never yet accomplished, though we set out every afternoon with the announcement on Mrs. Entwistle’s part, ‘Well, we really must get to the end to-day, my dear,’ to which I ever yielded a ready assent; but always at the same point, my friend, sinking upon a too, too tempting bench, said, with a short pant, ‘Eh, my love, I’m very sorry, but I’m spent, quite spent,’ and so subsided.

We had tea at half-past five, and supper at half-past eight punctually, and the evening was usually passed in reading, bezique, and conversation.

Our days were almost all conducted upon this unvarying pattern. On Sunday we went to church, of

course, seeking out first one and then another place of worship until we had found one to which a combination of good music and free seats induced us to remain faithful.

At first, I, in my conceit, was afflicted with the idea that Mrs. Entwistle's conversation might be characterised by a certain want of variety, depth, and interest. I even went the length of fearing that I should be bored by my kind friend, and lamenting over the idea that however much fatigued with her, gratitude and good manners would forbid my betraying my feelings. I need not have made myself unhappy. Mrs. Entwistle proved a—to me—most fascinating companion. She would tell me stories by the hour of the Yorkshire dale in which she was born, and of the quaint people who lived there. She had also many marvellous narratives to relate in which I took a greedy interest, of supernatural appearances, traditional sometimes, but some of which had occurred within the memory of living man and in families with whom she was intimately acquainted—of dogs howling before deaths—of clocks failing to strike, or striking an unusual number of times, as if they had gone mad—of swarms of bats around the house—of the awful bogeys or boggarts haunting the lonely fells which surrounded her parental farmhouse in Wensleydale. How her husband, though a Lancashire man, had been for her sake, 'fain to wed into Yorkshire,' and how he gave up his farm, patented an invention, and set up a mill in Manchester, and 'never looked behind him.' Then came Hugh—of this topic she was never tired; he had had all the business to manage since he was one-and-twenty, at which time his father had died, and care, perhaps, had made him seem a little older than he was, for his business was a large and ever-increasing one. But what a son, what a paragon he was! On this theme Mrs. Entwistle dilated constantly. Scarcely ~~eye~~ did we have a conversation without some chance word reminding her of some wonderful story of

Hugh's generosity or skill, or benevolence, or cleverness. The security which I felt that no visit of the said Hugh would disturb us—had not Mrs. Entwistle said he was too busy to come over and see her?—this feeling of safety enabled me to listen with equanimity, and even with complacency, to the good woman's panegyrics upon her son. I—upon the indisputable authority of my sister Alizon—knew him to be mortal—weak—yes, weak to the extent of amusing himself at my expense—and I could therefore afford to listen to every word of Mrs. Entwistle's raptures without being carried away by them. Thus entrenched in philosophic and impartial calm, I listened to the daily pæan offered up to the goodness of the absent one, and felt that I had forgiven him completely for his offences towards me—so completely, that I would not run the risk of seeing him again on any account. One day, however, I was betrayed into the inconsistency of actually imagining a meeting between Hugh and myself, and how changed he would find me, if it took place—no longer a little girl to be laughed at, but a young lady, calm, severe, and distant, with whom it would be impossible for the boldest to take liberties.

'But, thank Heaven,' thought I, 'there is no need to imagine anything of the kind—he will not come.'

CHAPTER XXII

It was Saturday afternoon and we had been three weeks at Southport. Mrs. Entwistle had fallen into a deeper sleep than usual. From her relaxed and nerveless hand the *Visitor* had fallen, and lay in a crumpled bundle on the floor. I was expending the whole force of my intellect in the endeavour to understand some poetry with a Latin name and by a modern author. It appeared to be a combination of Browning, Tennyson, and Swinburne in their most boyish and least lucid moments. 'Talkin's puzzlin' work,' said the immortal Mr. Tulliver, and I felt inclined to echo the sentiment in regard to the work of Fitzhoward Mauleverer St. Vincent Jones, as I tried in vain to comprehend the following sentiment—

'The dawn, quoth she, is nigh at hand ; my soul
In troubled flight herself to raise on high
The battered sea-beach seeks.'

This being a comparatively lucid passage, I was trying to make something out of it. I bent with knitted brows and pursed-up mouth over my volume. I shook my head, and muttered over the mystic words, while Mrs. Entwistle slumbered on.

I had a semi-consciousness that the door had opened, but, believing that I really had at last grasped the meaning of my author, I redoubled my attention to my book. In vain! Sighing deeply, I pushed my hair from my heated brow and raised my eyes.

‘And will it evermore be thus?’

Hugh Entwistle was in the doorway, looking from one to the other of us. When he perceived that he had literally fixed my attention, he inquired, trying in vain not to laugh—

‘Are you reading *Medora*?’

Though he spoke in a low voice, his words roused Mrs. Entwistle, who started up, looked in an amazed and guilty way around the room, and then, seeing Hugh, exclaimed—

‘Why, my dear boy, who would have expected to see you? I do believe, Betty, my dear, that I’ve been asleep.’

‘I do believe, my dear mother, that what you say is true. Certainly you look wonderfully better, which is a thing to be thankful for.’

‘Well, you may say the same of this dear child. Come here, Betty, my dear, and let him look at you.’

Not feeling at all wishful to do any such thing, I yet rose. But Hugh came to me before I had time to come to him, and shook hands heartily. Judging it better to defer my dignity to another time, I did the same.

‘You do indeed look different,’ said he. ‘I need hardly ask you how you are.’

‘Have you had your dinner, Hugh?’ asked his mother, anxiously. ‘What train did you come by?’

‘By the 1.15 from Bolton. I did get something to eat there. It was a sudden thought. I found there was really nothing to keep me at Hamerton, and I was tired of being alone. I hope there is room for me in the house.’

‘Oh, plenty, and if you are not tired——’

‘Why should I be tired?’

‘I was thinking that as Betty and I shall be going for our walk, you might come with us.’

‘Delighted, since you are so pressing.’

‘Oh, dear, you always do turn things into fun.’

‘Yes,’ thought I, vaguely, ‘that is true enough.’

'We must go on to the pier,' said Mrs Entwistle, when we set out; 'we never miss our turn on the pier,' and with that, we turned in at the turnstile.

The usual performance took place. At the same bench as on other days Mrs. Entwistle declared herself 'spent—quite spent,' and sank down upon the friendly resting-place; Hugh took a seat in the middle, and I sat beside him.

'This poor child wants sadly to go to the end of the pier, but I'm never able to manage it,' observed Mrs. Entwistle.

'Can't you? But I can. Suppose you stay here, and I take Miss Howarth to the end of the pier now'—just what I had been dreading—'and we can come back to you.'

'A very good idea!' assented Mrs. Entwistle. 'And if you don't find me here when you come back, I shall be walking slowly home.'

'Very well,' said he. 'Then shall we go, Miss Howarth?'

'Thank you,' said I, stiffly, and wondering why he had begun to call me Miss Howarth. It was rather disconcerting, though it might be good manners.

We paced away together towards the end of the pier, and when I say that I was truly embarrassed, unhappy, and uncomfortable, that will merely go to prove the fact that I must have been very silly, conceited, and egotistic. But it was so. The remembrance of Alizon's words had sunk deep into my mind. In every smile of Hugh Entwistle I saw a laugh at my expense, in every friendly word he said I fancied I detected a deeply-laid snare to draw me out and make me ridiculous, and this sensation did not add grace to my manner nor point to my remarks.

'I saw your sister yesterday,' he remarked, presently.

'Deb, did you? How was she?'

'She said she was very well. She thought she would be better, though if it would give over raining'

'Ah, I daresay! I wonder if the crocuses are out yet in our garden.'

'Are you homesick?'

'Homesick? No! What an idea.'

'I thought you might find it dull, alone with my mother here, after all your companions at home.'

'No, indeed! She is so very kind to me—I think she will spoil me—I am sure I don't know why she should be so good.'

'Is there something so very forbidding in your character?'

Thinking it well to keep aloof from personal subjects, I shook my head and said—

'I wonder whether Deb has heard from Alizon lately. She did not say so to me when she wrote.'

'Does not Miss Howarth write to you?'

'To me! Oh no! Only to Deb. She tells Deb everything,' I added, emphatically, as if I wished to imply that she had many and marvellous things for the ears of those privileged to know them.

'Miss Howarth seemed well and happy at Christmas.'

'Did you think so?' said I, feeling my embarrassment return, as I remembered that politeness to him could hardly be counted amongst my sister's virtues. I therefore, rejecting that topic as also unpropitious, said—

'How is Martin? Have you seen him lately?'

Hugh's face changed. He repressed a smile, and a little frown darkened his forehead.

'Martin is as well, as conceited, and as Byronic as ever.'

By this time we had arrived at the end of the pier, and seated ourselves with one accord upon a convenient bench.

'Mr Entwistle, don't you like Martin Lancaster?'

'Why should I dislike him! I am amused with him and annoyed with him fifty times a day.'

'What is your opinion of his character?'

'My dear child!' he exclaimed, with an alarmed look, 'do you expect me to be able to give an analysis of the character of every one I have to do with?'

'My dear child,' after 'Miss Howarth,' jarred upon my ears, and the tone of his answer sounded to me like a snub. I suppose my mortification was expressed in my face, for he suddenly asked—

'Have I offended you again? I seem always to be offending you.'

'But truly, what do you think of Martin?' I persisted. 'Because since that night I went with him up Blackrigg, we have never been such good friends as we used to be. I am sure I have tried to be friendly with him; though I do lose my temper sometimes—he is so exacting.'

'The young dog!' said Hugh, not unkindly. 'What causes the feud between you?'

'Well, Martin is very poetical, you know.'

'Moonshine!'

'But he really is. He writes beautiful poetry, and he thinks he is quite thrown away in the cotton trade.'

'The cotton trade, with its chances of making himself a place and a name, is quite thrown away upon him. He has ability, but he is deplorably self-conceited and lazy—as well as ignorant.'

'What a great deal poor Saxon would give to be in his place!' I could not help saying.

'Your brother—why?'

'Why, Saxon is perfectly devoted to manufacturing businesses. He was almost broken-hearted when he had to go to the bank instead of into a factory—an office, you know. He envies Martin, and yet he never complains. He is very good. But I don't think he will ever be happy at the bank.' And I shook my head, and returned to Hugh's proposition—the ignorance and laziness of Martin Lancaster. If Martin were ignorant, what must I be?

'He has read a great deal,' I ventured to suggest.

Hugh laughed. 'His kind of reading is not of much use—to a person who wants to make his way in the world.'

'But don't you think,' I argued, respectfully, 'that he may be quite unfit for business and yet very clever in other things?'

'I think he has a very kind, forgiving little advocate.'

'Do you think he could write, if he really tried?' I asked.

'You speak as if "writing" required no work. Before Martin can do anything—before he can become a man—he must cut down his overweening self-conceit, and must make up his mind to work. As for his talent for writing—as I have only heard a few pages of a romance called *Medora*——'

This was more than I could endure. I fancied I had been talking so discreetly, so safely. I jumped from my seat, turned my back upon him, and appeared to contemplate the waves that were breaking over the Horseshoe Bank! In reality, I was hoping he could not see my red face and shining eyes. Oh, Robin! what an unkind trick you played me in the garden at Fosshouse that summer Sunday afternoon! The dignity which I had felt by anticipation to be so easy vanished like chaff before the wind on a fair trial. Why could not I rise superior to so mundane a pursuit as teasing?

'Miss Howarth!'

'Yes?' I returned, faintly.

'The very last time I talked with you, you were angry about this very thing. Is it real, or are you pretending?'

'Do I look as if I were pretending?' I asked, whisking round rapidly. I met his eyes. He looked as if he would take counsel with me if I could be got to hear reason. I stood, feeling angry, helpless, and ashamed, and wishing I could behave less like a baby and more like a reasonable being.

'I wish you would sit down,' he pursued, 'and let us talk about it.'

Something in his look and tone convinced me, despite Alizon's remark, that he was not amusing himself with

me. I resumed my seat, and said feebly, 'Very well.'

There was a pause, during which, fortunately, my sense of the ludicrous came to my aid. How utterly absurd the whole proceeding, and what a long-suffering man was he at my side! My lips twitched, as I saw Hugh considering, with a puzzled face, what he should say next. I laughed aloud, and a look of inexpressible relief at once appeared on his face.

'That is right!' said he. 'There is always hope while one can laugh.'

Inspired by some motive—whether wise or foolish, I could not say—I blurted out the truth.

'I was afraid you were laughing at me,' said I. 'I thought you were drawing me out to amuse yourself, and make me look foolish. I can't bear to be laughed at, and as *Medora* was such a silly thing, and only fit to be laughed at, I hated to hear you say the word.'

'Did I not promise?' he asked, meeting my gaze with the utmost gravity.

'But—but—you have not kept your promise.'

'Have I ever made fun of it?'

'N—no. But you have often begun to make fun of it, only I stopped you.'

'Oh, indeed! And do you actually mean that you cannot bear to hear the name of the thing, between you and me? Do you know, I think even Martin would hardly go so far? But since it is so, I will, if you like, promise never even to name that fatal subject. Say the word and the promise is given.'

Hugh Entwistle, with all his kindness, had the knack of making me feel smaller, more childish, and more ridiculous than any one else, simply because he gravely treated my follies as if they had been wisdom.

'You do not speak,' he said, at last. 'Must I promise?'

'No,' I answered, turning away.

'No! Then what must I do? You will not allow

me to promise not to allude to things which annoy you, and yet, when I do allude to them, you are very angry.'

'I'll make a promise,' said I, 'if you will accept it, that is?'

'Indeed, I shall be only too glad, unless it should be to the effect that you will never speak to me again, or something of that kind, against which I should have to protest.'

'You know I don't mean that. I mean, that if you will only not tease me about this, I will never be so stupid again—if I can help.'

'A wise reservation,' replied my tormentor. 'Then *Medora*——'

I was just now in a very meek mood, or this would have been the last straw—the drop too much. As it was, I said nothing, but stuck the ferule of my umbrella between two of the planks of the pier. Then three things happened simultaneously; tears, in spite of my Spartan attempts to repress them, fell from my eyes upon my dress; a hand was laid upon mine, and the ferule of my umbrella snapped of, and remained neatly wedged in between the planks.

'Ah, I was afraid you'd break——' began Hugh. Whether the next word would have been 'down' or 'it,' posterity can never know. Hugh saw my face.

'Don't cry, my child,' said he. 'I never meant to make you cry. You certainly cannot stand teasing.'

'I'm not crying,' said I, which was a great untruth.

'Very well. Let us shake hands, shall we? If I mention *Medora* again, you will know that it is with no evil intent—eh?'

With a forced smile I put out my hand, feeling vanquished. Indeed I was vanquished, for not only should I hear of *Medora* again—often, I saw it in his eyes—but I should have to look as if I liked it.

Soon afterwards, we walked down the pier again, but Mrs. Entwistle's resting-place was vacant. Hugh carried my mutilated umbrella prominently all down

the promenade, and when we arrived at our dwelling-place we found that Mrs. Entwistle had accomplished her intention of ordering something substantial for tea. In due time it appeared, and was found to consist of six large eggs and about a pound of ham.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON Sunday Mrs. Entwistle always went to sleep for the whole afternoon. This occurred on the day after Hugh's arrival. It was very fine, and the sun streamed warmly in at the bow-window of our sitting-room, when Mr. Entwistle, coming up to me, as I intently regarded a most remarkable costume then going past the window, said—

‘You seem to admire that style of dress. Do you think of adopting it for yourself?’

‘I!—no. I like looking at the people. I should never get tired of it—never.’

‘I think you would in about a week.’

‘I have been here three weeks, and have never been tired once; so you are wrong at last, Mr. Entwistle,’ said I, with a triumphant smile.

‘If I had known you were so anxious to put me in the wrong, I could have obliged you long ago, and would have done so,’ he said, laughing. ‘I will try what I can do between now and to-morrow morning.’

‘Oh, you are going to-morrow?’ I asked, with some interest.

‘Yes. I am happy to find that I have said something which gives you pleasure, at last.’

‘Oh, I did not mean that I was glad,’ I hastened to say, feeling guilty, though, for it must be owned I was somewhat relieved to find that he was leaving so soon.

‘Did you not? Very well. Don't you think it is

too fine to be indoors all afternoon? Wouldn't you like a walk?'

'Yes, very much,' was my first joyful response, but then, as I looked round at Mrs. Entwistle, buried in slumber, I became doubtful, and said—

'But Mrs. Entwistle——'

'You did not think I would drag her out on Sunday afternoon? No! Look here!'

He produced pocket-book and pencil, and wrote something on a leaf, which he tore out, and showed to me, 'B. and myself gone to the Park. Shall be home to tea.'

'That is, provided you will go?' he added.

'Yes, with pleasure,' said I, closing my book and laying it upon the table.

'Get ready then, and I will take you,' said Hugh, and without more ado I went to my room, donned my best hat, selected the most respectable pair of gloves I possessed, viewed my reflection in the looking-glass, and decided, rather ruefully, that my things were very shabby, and that I should like some new ones very much, but that there was no prospect of my having any at present. I supposed, however, that if Mr. Entwistle were ashamed of such a companion, he would hardly have invited me to go with him.

We took our way to the Park, and wandered about its tortuous walks and avenues, and looked at the very few people who were there besides ourselves—a few nursemaids with their charges, some boys who gazed wistfully at the swings in the closed gymnasium, and some other boys who were feeding the water-fowl in the pond.

'Oh!' said I, 'how I wish I had brought some bread or biscuit. They are so greedy. Did you ever feed fowls?'

'Yes, once or twice. Look at that boy. He seems to have got ~~any~~ amount of bread. We'll try to get some from him.'

He pointed to a scrubby-looking urchin who was casting his bread upon the waters in a reckless manner.

'I daresay he has stolen it,' observed Hugh, 'but never mind! We will negotiate. Here, my lad!'

'My lad' looked up, and after a short parley consented to part with some of the staff of life, which he acknowledged he had purloined from his aunt's larder, at an usurious price. The bread was placed in my hands, and this piece of Sunday trading being accomplished, I was at liberty to feed the birds.

It was pleasant to throw pieces of bread to them, and watch their greedy clamour. I liked to know that I could please or displease even a feathered fowl, and my companion looked urbanely on, perhaps liking to feel on his part—though that did not occur to me at the moment—that he could please or displease his silly little friend.

So we stayed on until my last piece of bread was in my hand. I would fling it far out, and watch the eager scuffle of the fowls to obtain it. With this intention I exerted all my strength, and threw the bread as if it had been a ten-pound weight. The usual result of what Johnny would call 'a girl's shots' happened. The bread dropped into the water close at my feet, and I, if I had not been caught and held back by Hugh, should inevitably have followed it, and become a prey to the monsters of the deep.

'Mind what you are about, Betty; you were nearly over that time,' said he, with some alarm in his look.

I tried to ignore the fact that he had been calling me 'Betty.' But for that conversation with Alizon I should never have noticed it. Now I did at once, and my face, in its usual provoking, unmanageable way, revealed all I thought.

Hugh was still holding the hand he had seized when he pulled me back, and there dawned upon his face something like disappointment as he said—

'You have really caught me in the wrong at last, Miss Howarth.'

'Why should you call me Miss Howarth?' said I, recklessly, and surprised at my own anxiety to find favour in his eyes; 'no one else does. I prefer to be called simply Betty.'

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

'Betty it shall be then,' said he, smiling, and 'Betty' it certainly was. The word was taken up by three separate and distinct voices—voices that I knew. Their owners turned a corner in the rocky wall, displaying to my astonished gaze—Saxon—Martin—Robin.

'Boys!' I gasped, and could say no more.

'Girl!' retorted Robin, uncivilly, and then I recovered sufficiently to ask—

'How did you come? When did you come? What does it mean?'

'Always a dozen questions at once,' said Saxon, 'but——'

'We came,' said Robin, 'for a lark. For the day. By a cheap trip. Bolton to Southport and back for three shillings. We set off hours ago, and all to see you—for no other reason, of course. And while you are wasting bread on those birds we are starving.'

'Then why didn't you go where you could get something to eat' was my unsisterly retort.

But ere they could reply, Hugh interposed—

'You must all come and have tea with us—if you are ready to go, Betty?'

'Quite. But they are such an army.'

'All the better. Let us go home.'

With that he moved on, Saxon and Robin following him, and tendering profuse explanations, while Martin followed with me in the rear.

'Hope you're enjoying yourself, I'm sure,' he sneered.

'Yes, I am, Martin, very much. But you don't look particularly pleased.'

'Wish I'd never come. Cheap trip——Horrid! Vulgar set of wretches in the train. Disgusting affair!' he grumbled, morosely.

'How did you find out that we were in the Park?' I inquired.

'We went straight to your place, and found the old lady snoring like a pig—ten pigs. There was a slip of paper on the table. "B. and myself gone to the Park," etc. Uncommon cool, I call it.'

'Call what?' I asked, perfectly lost in amazement at Martin's extraordinary behaviour.

'"B. and myself." Such cheek! What business has he to call you "B." or Betty either?'

'Well, really! As much business as you have to call me "B. or Betty either." I think I never heard such nonsense,' said I, highly incensed, but convinced that Martin was only in one of his tempers, and that the best way to treat him was to deny him any right whatever to criticise my conduct, or that of my friends.

He took off his hat and made me a sweeping bow, smiling disagreeably.

'I beg your pardon. I have no doubt he is charming—

'How gentle was my Damon's air,
Like sunny beams his golden hair!'

and so on. We were very stupid to come to the Park at all. "B. and myself" might have told us we were not wanted.'

'I think you must be mad,' said I, utterly out of patience with him. 'Why did you come, if you can only behave like a bear when you get here?'

'Since you don't want me, I'll go away' was Martin's prompt reply. With that he actually turned on his heel, and was making off. Instead of letting him go, and taking no further notice of him, I weakly grew alarmed, and felt that I must prevent such a *fiasco* at all hazards. I seized his arm.

‘Martin! Don’t be so awfully stupid. Come along directly.’

“‘Birds in their little nests agree,” and a bear is sadly out of place amongst doves, and such amiable creatures.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. Oh, Martin, why will you be so unkind?’

No unbending in the frowning face of the lad as he said—

‘Hands off! You had better run after the others, or you will have to go alone.’

‘I’m not going without you.’

‘Betty, say you want me to come. Invite me yourself,’ said he, suddenly changing, taking my hand, and looking affectionately at me. Two maid-servants went by at the moment, stared at us, and giggled.

‘I do ask you—I beg you will come!’

‘Do you care for me to come?’ he persisted. I looked after the rapidly diminishing figures of Hugh and my brothers, and replied, ‘Yes, very much.’

‘I don’t believe it. You don’t care a straw whether I come or not,’ said he, breaking from my hold in a restive manner.

‘Martin, I solemnly declare that if you don’t come I shall be miserable. I shall not enjoy myself one bit. How could I?’

‘You are sure of that?’

‘Perfectly certain. I should be wretched. There, do come! That’s a dear boy.’

He unbent so far as to resume his walk in the direction of our lodgings, where we arrived shortly after the others, and found Hugh introducing them to his mother as ‘Betty’s brothers.’

‘Betty’s brothers,’ she is thankful to relate, did rise to the occasion. Their vociferous talk calmed down; they behaved with decency, and treated both Mrs. Entwistle and her son with a respect and courtesy which greatly elevated them in the eyes of their

embarrassed sister. They were made heartily welcome, and the entertainment would have been a complete success, but for what appeared to me the outrageous behaviour of Martin Lancaster. I was desired by Mrs. Entwistle to save her the trouble of pouring out tea for so large a party, by doing it myself. Thankful to be of any use, I gladly complied, and was assisted in my operations partly by Hugh, partly by Robin. My brothers evidently enjoyed their meal, and the occasion in general. I was far too much occupied in supplying their wants to get much myself. Indeed, I was too excited with the unexpected visit, and with a dim idea which persistently hovered about my mind that all was not quite right, to feel hungry at all. Every time my eyes accidentally fell on Martin's face, this conviction of a something wrong became stronger. The pleasure of the affair was not complete, but I had no time to analyse the matter, and decide upon the exact thing wanting to make it so.

At last, tea being over, and the table in course of being cleared, I said I would go to my room, and find some woollen scarves which I had been knitting for my brothers, and which they might as well take with them. Scarcely had I closed the door, when I heard it opened, and again slammed behind some one, and turning to look, beheld Martin.

'Good-night,' said he, 'I'm off.'

'Off—what do you mean? It is not nearly train-time yet.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' said he, rudely. 'And do you suppose I can't see when and where I'm not wanted? If they ask anything about me, you can tell Saxon I shall be at the station when they get there.'

'If you will go, good-night!' I said, holding out my hand, with, I must confess, a sense of relief.

'Pooh!' was all he said. 'Don't try the hypocritical dodge. It doesn't suit you.'

And with that, and with a final scowl, he departed, leaving me very much disconcerted.

Of course, inquiries were made on my return to the sitting-room—inquiries which I answered as well as I could, though I felt that my replies sounded lame in the extreme. But, in talk and laughter, one by and by forgot Martin, after Saxon had contributed the remark that he—Martin—was the most extraordinary chap he had ever known, for that the expedition had been entirely of his planning—he had said what a lark it would be to run over, and surprise Betty—‘And now he goes off and leaves us in the lurch in this style!’ he added.

When at last my brothers too had taken their departure, I cast myself into an easy-chair, and said—

‘Well, I was glad to see the boys—my boys; but I don’t like surprises.’

‘You should not provoke people to cause you them then,’ said Hugh, with a laugh.

I stared at him.

‘I!’

‘Betty, tell me something, on your honour. Has Martin never told you why he behaves in this ridiculous style?’

‘No, never,’ said I, wondering whether Hugh had imposed some peculiarly obnoxious branch of office duty upon Martin.

‘And you cannot guess?’

‘I cannot, upon my honour.’

‘I am very glad to hear it’ was all the answer I got.

‘It would be a pity if you could.’

‘But you will tell me?’

‘Heaven forbid!’

‘But, Mr. Entwistle——’

‘My dear, I shall not tell you.’

Hugh left on Monday morning, and did not disturb us again during the fortnight which we remained at Southport. Mrs. Entwistle and I, during our five weeks’

companionship, had formed quite a friendship for one another. Her last words to me, as we parted at the Hamerton station for our respective homes, were—

‘Good-bye, Betty, my dear, and mind you come and see me often.’

CHAPTER XXIV

It was midsummer—that is, mid-June—two years later, and we were all, except Robin, assembled at home to celebrate that tremendous event—the first wedding in the family—Deb's wedding.

I was surprised that Deb should be married first. I had never thought her likely to marry. It was so, however, and at the precise time of which I write the house was pervaded with that dreary chill which always follows just after

‘ A wedding or a festival ;
A mourning or a funeral.’

For it was over ; the deed was done ; Deborah and the Reverend Robert Hopwood were united. The story of Deb's courtship was a short and simple annal. About a year ago she left her Hamerton pupils, and went to teach some little girls, children of friends of Sydney's in the south of England, in a village where there was a bachelor vicar. That vicar was Robert Hopwood, and Deb was now his wife.

In the afternoon Alizon and I were in our room resting. The wedding had been a quiet one, and we were not having any festivities on the occasion ; but Sydney Bamford, whose weakness every one knew, was. She always seized the faintest shadow of an excuse for gathering her friends and neighbours together from the east and from the west, from the north also and from the south, and making merry with them. She had

utterly refused to allow the present occasion to pass by without something to distinguish it. 'Something' had resolved itself into a dance—not a large one; but a dance Sydney must have.

Therefore Alizon and I were taking repose after our past labours, in preparation for those to come, and as we rested—each stretched out upon a narrow iron pallet—our respective beds—we discussed men and things.

Alizon had come home for a week, to be present at the wedding. Already, since the ceremony, she announced that she wished she was going back to Haythorpe that afternoon.

'You might have kept that aspiration to yourself,' said I, feeling injured.

'Perhaps I might, but I don't care for Hamerton now, and I do for Haythorpe. There's no one to talk to here.'

'And at Haythorpe there is Mr. Labatt, I presume?'

'Yes, there certainly is.'

'I believe Mr. Labatt to be an aged humbug.'

'Forty-two—only forty-two, though I fancied he was old at first.'

'What is more, I mistrust him. I believe he is a sort of Doctor Fell.'

'You don't know him, so it is of no use your talking about him. Do you know that when old uncle Peter Wilson died, and left mother that money, she wrote to me, and told me I might come home if I liked, but I declined.'

'Yes, I know. I saw the letter. Mother was pleased that you wanted to go on with your work, but she did not like the cynical tone of your letter. Neither did I.'

'Thanks! Pray go on.'

'Uncle Peter Wilson might have given mother that money long ago, when she wanted it so much—when she let Martin come to us because of what the Bamfords offered. He—uncle, I mean—had saved no end of money, which he did not know how to spend.'

'Uncle Peter did not wish to part with his pearls of price—his pounds sterling. But prosperity has done us all good. Mother looks very different now that her income is five or six hundred a year better than it was. Saxon, since he left the bank, and went to—Mr. Entwistle—I don't know why he should have chosen him, I am sure—looks a different being. If it had not been for that money, I do not believe Robert would ever have proposed to Deb; not that he gets anything with her, but it is pleasanter to know that one's wife's family is not in rags. Still, I am glad we did have to work—or I should never have known the Labatts. Just fancy if I had never met them.'

'And I should never have had so much kindness from dear old Mrs. Entwistle,' said I, offering a few reminiscences of my own.

Alizon shrugged her shoulders.

'As for you, Betty—do you ever use a looking-glass?'

'Constantly. So does every woman whose eyes are the same colour, and who is not marked with small-pox.'

'Yes. The only difference in that respect between women and men is, that men would use their glass when their eyes don't match, etc. But now to return to our narrative. What does your glass tell you when you look at yourself?'

'Oh, that I am as lovely as Cleopatra, and Mary Stuart, and the Venus of Milo, and Ninon de L'Enclos, and all the rest of them put together.'

'Well,' said my sister, deliberately, 'if your glass shows you nothing but Betty Howarth as she is, you need not be disappointed. You will see nothing better worth looking at in a day's journey.'

She smiled upon me rather pleasantly with her sarcastic lips.

'Oh, Alizon!' said I, not without a lurking suspicion that she was not joking at all. Her gray eyes viewed my face, and the smile died away from her lips. She sighed a little as she said—

'You are a child yet, Betty, in spite of your eighteen years; but tell me, my dear—you can surely confess to your sister—did you never think, when you saw your own face reflected in your toilet-glass, that it was—we'll put it mildly—a very pretty face?'

I tried not to smile, and studied the embroidery on my handkerchief.

'Now, Betty, own it!' exhorted Alizon, getting down from her pallet, and standing beside me—'own that you were not displeased with what you saw.'

'Well, Alizon, I will say that I have begun to think myself a little better-looking than I used to be.'

Alizon laughed. 'I heard somebody say you were like a tall, white lily, the other day.'

'Tell me who said so!'

'No, I cannot tell you. But, Betty, dear, seriously——'

'Seriously, Alizon?'

'When people are as pretty and as attractive as you are, there are never wanting other people ready to fall in love with them, or to fancy they have done so, or to behave as if they were in love when they are not. Very often they mean nothing—very often they say or look a great deal, and deceive people.'

She stopped. I felt my face glow, as I asked, trying to draw myself up with dignity—

'Alizon, what do you mean? I am not——'

Alizon looked at me earnestly, and in spite of the topic nearest my heart at the moment—in spite of a name I was dreading and expecting to hear from her unsparing lips—I had a moment to spare in which to feel deep admiration for Alizon herself. She had left us, two years ago, a girl—older, perhaps, than most girls of her age, but still emphatically a girl. Now she was no longer a girl. At three-and-twenty she had the repose, the dignity, and the individuality which can only belong to a clever, cultivated, self-possessed woman, and she was too an exceedingly handsome girl—a girl

whose strong, commanding, yet refined beauty would have been striking without any complementary gifts of mind.

There was a troubled look in her usually steadfast eyes at this moment; her lips quivered a little as she sat down beside me, took my hand, and said—

‘Betty, you are the only person, I believe, that I really care for. Can you believe this?’

‘I am sure you care for me, Alizon.’

‘I do, dear, and I want you to be happy. I am afraid of your being unhappy. Oh, Betty! Take care how you trust people! Take care how you allow yourself to care for people!’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, feebly.

‘You know what I mean, Betty. You must remember what I said to you two years ago.’

‘And do you mean to say it again?’ I asked, raising my eyes to hers.

‘Yes,’ said she, kissing me; ‘every word, my child.’

‘You need not, Alizon, I assure you,’ said I, with a brave assumption of indifference.

‘Well—a word in time——’

‘Oh, come! Remember your continual *laissez faire* sermons, and act upon them.’

‘So I will. Having said my say I will hold my peace. Things must take their course. I wish poor old Robin were here to-day!’

‘So do I,’ I replied, beginning to sing Robin’s favourite song—

‘What would you do, love,
If, home returning,
With hopes high burning—
With wealth for you——’

‘I wouldn’t sing that,’ observed Alizon. ‘The ship went down, you know.’

‘Robin’s ship won’t go down. He always was a lucky boy,’ said I, as I pictured him on that ‘stormy ocean’ which he had chosen as his pathway in life.

‘Half-past six,’ remarked Alizon, consulting her watch. ‘Let us go down and see if any repast is in preparation. Sydney asked us for half-past seven, didn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, sitting up on my bed, and sighing resignedly, as my hair came tumbling about my shoulders. Alizon left the room, and I went to the glass to rearrange my tumbled locks. With our recent conversation fresh in my mind, one can hardly wonder that I took a long and critical survey of my own face and figure. What did I see?

A colourless face, which might or might not be oval, but which was certainly not round. A large mass of—just now—untidy hair, as nearly black as possible, framed this face. Long, straight eyebrows came over eyes which I fondly tried to believe black, but in which, in impartial moments, I detected the family gray lurking very decidedly.

My mouth was my greatest grievance. I considered it too large, and also thought my lips were too red for the rest of my face. Still, in a moment of inspiration, I felt that to some people mine might be an attractive face. At least, I felt its claims to beauty to rest upon a much surer foundation since Alizon, who was nothing if not critical, had pronounced a favourable opinion upon it.

‘I suppose I must be pretty,’ I decided. ‘Alizon seems quite certain about it. Perhaps, when she is not by, I am; but I am sure there are very few women so handsome as Alizon.’

With that I coiled up my hair as rapidly as might be, secured it on the top of my head, and gave that head a shake, to try if the structure was firm enough for dancing. Finding that it was, I descended to the dining-room.

Here I found a large party assembled round a meal which was dinner and tea; Alizon presiding. I took my place between Martin and Bobby, and received a

cup of tea. In addition to our own people there were one or two of Mr. Hopwood's relations and college friends—young men who had done duty as groomsmen, and who would have to do more duty as dancers. Saxon and Martin had, I presumed, been entertaining them during the afternoon. The conversation was loud and cheerful, and under cover of the general row going on, Martin presently addressed me in a low voice—

'Well?' I said.

'I want you to give me two or three dances to-night.'

'Indeed! Perhaps you would like me to sit out while I am not dancing with you.'

'The first waltz,' he persisted, 'and——.'

'I shall not be dictated to, Martin. When we get to Fosshouse, perhaps I may settle which dance I can spare you.'

'When more eligible partners have been satisfied,' he sneered.

'Don't be rude, or you will get none,' said I, much exasperated at his dictatorial tone.

'I say, Betty,' observed Saxon, at this juncture; 'don't engage yourself for every dance to-night. Remember you have a brother, and keep one for him.'

'As many as you like, Saxon. Will you have the first waltz?'

'Who ever heard of waltzing with a brother?' growled Martin. 'I'm negotiating for that myself, Saxon.'

I saw Saxon hesitate. My measures must be prompt.

'I shall not dance that waltz with you, Martin. Saxon, if you won't dance that waltz with me, I shall sit out.'

'Well, well, don't get into a passion about it' was the fraternal rejoinder. When conversation was loud again, I, unable to let well alone, turned to Martin, and, by way of making up for his disappointment, said—

‘Martin, will you have the second?’

‘Thank you for nothing. I wanted the first.’

‘Do you mean that you will not dance with me when I ask you?’

‘I will if you will give me two, instead of the first.’

‘A round and a square?’

‘Two rounds.’

Demurring, I repeated my first handsome offer of a round and a square.

‘Two rounds. If you won’t give me two rounds’—he bent towards me, under pretence of taking my cup—‘I won’t go.’

‘Martin!’

No answer except a nod.

‘Very well,’ said I, reluctantly. ‘But remember, you have stolen them. They are not given.’

He turned towards me with a black look of anger, and—what else? The days were at hand in which I learned actually to dread Martin’s look.

‘I know that,’ he answered, in the same voice. ‘Everything I have from you is stolen. I have to take your very looks by force.’

‘I hate parables’ was my hasty answer, as I edged my chair away from him and nearer to Bobby, who demanded how much more room I wanted.

Feeling that I had made the best terms with Martin that circumstances would allow, I resumed my meal with excellent appetite, unheeding the looks of wonder cast upon me by one of our stranger guests, who had apparently heard part at least of our discussion.

‘A ball of dancing’ was an event in Hamerton. My first waltz, with Saxon, came off victoriously. I looked round, in order to find out who was Alizon’s partner, and discovered him in Ralph. Wishing, however, to make a private negotiation with Saxon, I had to proceed warily.

‘Saxon, is there any one in particular that you want to take in to supper?’

'N—no,' said Saxon, surveying all the girls with a critical eye.

'Well, if no one else asks me, will you take me?'

'Oh, I say! But Martin will ask you. Yes, Martin is sure to ask you.'

'If he does I shall say I am engaged already, and then you will have to take me in.'

'What are you driving at? Is it your object not to go in with Martin?'

'Yes—precisely.'

'Oh, very well. I'll stand your friend.'

I was elated at this, little thinking how worse than useless in the end my machinations were to prove. At that moment Hugh Entwistle came up, and asked me for a dance. I handed him my card, and Saxon, without more ado, left us. Mr. Entwistle returned me my programme, and was about to speak, when Martin came up, and without taking any notice of Hugh, began—

'We did not fix which were to be my dances, Betty. Suppose we do so now, before your card is filled up.'

'The fifth is the first I am down for,' said Hugh, bowing and departing. Martin opened the programme and bit his lips.

'Cheeky—as usual!' he commented. 'Pray did you see what he was doing!'

'No,' said I, examining the card which he held out with a tragic gesture.

'Three!' he observed angrily, 'and all rounds! Waltz—galop—waltz. Humph!'

'Put down your own, and make no remarks, Martin.'

'If he has three, I ought to have three.'

'You will have two dances, as we agreed, or none. Give me the card, and I will put them down myself.'

There was an ugly look in the eyes I met, although he was smiling. I stood in angry, disappointed silence, while he put his initials to two round dances, before

and after Hugh Entwistle's first. He was about to inscribe his name for a third, when I interposed—

'If you put that down, Martin, I will make a point of dancing it with some one else—yes, if I have to ask Ralph himself to dance it with me.'

'You need not look so high as the master of the house,' he sneered, as he relinquished the card; 'I am sure "H. E." will be delighted, and when you have already three of his monograms, what difference can a fourth or even a fifth make?'

'I hope you will enjoy your dances when you get them,' said I.

'You will soon be able to snub a fellow as completely as your sister.'

'Not more completely than he deserves.'

'This, I think, is our first dance' was all he replied, offering me his arm.

In the course of that dance came the question I had been expecting. 'Are you engaged to any one for supper, Betty?'

'Yes.'

'Might one ask to whom?'

'You will see when the time comes.'

'I know without asking' was the disappointed answer, and I smiled as I pictured his feelings when he should see me come into the supper-room on Saxon's arm.

My amusement, however, was destined only to exist in anticipation. At the end of my first dance with Mr. Entwistle, he also made inquiries as to whether I was engaged for the meal of the evening. Determined to act with perfect equity and fairness, I replied—

'Yes, I am.'

'Oh!' said he, in a disappointed voice, 'I had hoped to be in time, but Martin——of course it is Martin?'

My dread of Hugh's teasing powers was as great as ever. I trembled to think of the 'roasting' on some

future occasion, if I did not tell him now that Saxon was to be my partner at supper, and therefore, with the best intentions in the world, I said, as indifferently as I could—

‘No—it is Saxon.’

‘Saxon! I never heard such nonsense. Your brother! Here, I say, Saxon!’ catching him by the sleeve as he passed. ‘Your sister is telling me some wild tale about being engaged to go in to supper with you. I am sure your good feeling will not permit such a thing when you come to think of it. Do you mind giving it up for this occasion?’

‘Mind! Not in the least,’ said he, perfidiously. ‘It was her own doing, because she didn’t want——’

‘Be quiet, Saxon!’ I interposed, and so stopped further disclosures; ‘and you must keep your promise——’

‘Not I! There’s Laura Brierley—I am going to ask her if she’ll go to supper with me. She is such a jolly girl. So look out for yourself, Betty,’ and with that he left us.

‘But—but——’ I began.

‘One thing is certain,’ observed Hugh, with a smile; ‘a friend sticketh closer than a brother. And I, too, advise you to make the best of it.’

I felt very uncomfortable—though, it must be confessed, not displeased—at thus being taken possession of; but on looking into Hugh’s face his eyes met mine with a smile, which, coupled with Martin’s late looks and remarks, dashed my pleasure considerably.

I did not, however, yet know the worst. My parley with Hugh and Saxon had taken place in a window recess, and I had been dimly conscious, all the time, of a figure hovering near, but had been too much engrossed with my own concerns to notice it. Soon, however, I was to be enlightened. Martin came to claim his second dance, which we went through almost without a word, and when it was over, we, in common

with many others, passed out of the ballroom into the hall. It felt cool and pleasant there. The large entrance door stood wide open, and we instinctively stepped towards it.

‘Should we go into the garden for a few minutes?’ he asked, in a gentler tone.

Hoping to conciliate and put him into a better humour, I assented, and we passed out into the garden. I was congratulating myself silently upon the fact that when this was over, I should be rid of Martin and his ill-temper for the rest of the evening. He broke in upon my reverie by remarking—

‘Do you know you are really cleverer than I imagined, Betty?’

‘In what way?’

‘You are really needlessly clever. You waste your talents upon trifles.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘When you told me you were already engaged for supper, that was a needless piece of cleverness. If you had simply declined to let me take you, that would have been enough. It was rather too bad, wasn’t it, to make a mock engagement with your brother—on purpose to break it off when the right man came? You might have spared me that.’

‘It was not a mock engagement on my part. If Saxon had kept to his word, I should have kept to mine.’

‘Why did you tell that fellow you were promised to Saxon? You knew he would take no notice of that.’

I made no reply, not having any ready. He went on, bitterly—

‘No doubt it amuses you. A flirt delights in such things as that.’

‘How dare you speak to me in that manner?’ I cried, angrily, withdrawing my hand from his arm, and standing before him. ‘You know you are saying what is not true.’

‘Do you mean to deny that you always flirt with Hugh Entwistle? Do you mean to deny that you intended him to take you in to supper to-night?’ demanded Martin, excitedly.

‘I mean to deny that you have any business to speak to me on such a matter, and I beg you will give over at once.’

‘That is all the answer you can make,’ he cried, in angry triumph. ‘I knew it, and I brought you here to say——’

‘To say what you have no right to say, Martin.’

‘To say that you shall not play with me in this manner. I will not be the go-between of a flirt——’

He flourished his hand in a rhetorical manner, and I, by way of answer, struck it passionately with my own. In my anger, my shame, and my indignation, brute force appeared to me to be the only way of retaliating upon him, and punishing his obstinate determination to insult me.

‘It is a shameful untruth,’ I almost panted.

He laughed sarcastically.

‘It does one good to see you in such a rage. Your temper is honest, at any rate, and as for untruths—if it were an untruth you would not be so angry about it. I repeat it—I will not be flirted with, to draw on Hugh Entwistle——’

It was my turn to laugh, and, being provoked beyond bounds, I did laugh, heartily and contemptuously, glad of the opening to snub him thoroughly.

‘Your conceit is too great,’ I exclaimed. ‘I flirt with you! I should not care if I never saw you again. It is you who are always seeing me, and tormenting me, and making my life miserable. Your temper is perfectly unbearable, and you seem to think you may hector it over me as much as you choose. You are not my brother—I am not answerable to you for a single thing I say or do. Keep your place!’

Martin smiled—an ugly smile. I wished I had never left the house with him.

'I will keep my place when I know it,' he said, as he imprisoned my hands and fixed his eyes upon my face. My whole soul revolted against his violence, his jealousy, and his vanity, but I would not stoop to struggle with him.

He looked as if he would speak; then suddenly dropping my hands, said—

'No—it is useless to say anything yet. My turn will come, and last is longest and best.'

With that he walked towards the house, and I was constrained to follow him. My pleasure for the evening was over—drained to the dregs.

When we re-entered the ballroom we found that the guests were consuming chicken and champagne in another room. The first sight that met my eyes was the figure of Hugh Entwistle, standing all alone in the middle of the room, his face wearing as black a look as a face well can wear. Martin, without a moment's warning, dropped my hand from the arm which he had gingerly extended to me when we entered the house, informed Mr. Entwistle, in a haughty voice, that he, and not I, was to blame for my non-appearance, turned upon his heel and disappeared. I was left standing alone, until Hugh Entwistle came up to me, drew my arm within his, and asked me in a low eager voice—

'What is the matter? What has that wretched boy been saying or doing to annoy you? Betty—tell me!'

His tone was not less decisive than Martin's had been a short time ago. Remembering what Martin had been saying, I laughed a little unsteadily.

'Tell me!' he repeated.

'It was nothing of any importance. Only temper—like naughty children. I wonder where Alizon is.'

'She went to the supper-room just now, with Bamford. Shall we go too, or would you like to rest awhile?'

He made a suggestive step towards a couch, but I,

resisting the impulse to let him lead me where he would, gathered my scattered wits together again, and said—

‘Oh yes! Let us go, or—or—there will be nothing left to eat, and I am so hungry.’

He said nothing, but did not oppose my movement towards the supper-room.

That meal did at last pass over, and the evening came to a close. I did not see Martin again. Alizon, seeing that something had gone wrong, considerably contrived that we should be amongst the first to leave, and did not ask me a question. Perhaps she, who was so proudly superior to feelings, could sleep her calm, tranquil sleep; but I lay awake, going over the events of the day again with feverish distinctness of recollection—from the moment in which Alizon and I followed Deb to the altar steps, to that in which Martin let my hand fall and grandiloquently announced that ‘last was longest and best.’

‘I wish I had never seen Martin Lancaster, or else that he would not think himself a man when he is nothing but a conceited boy!’ was my last waking thought.

CHAPTER XXV

FOUR days later Alizon returned to Haythorpe and her duties, going, as I could not help thinking, very cheerfully. I saw her off from the Hamerton station, and then returned home, and entered the schoolroom. My only pupils now were Clara and Fanny; and I, with better health and advanced years, found it easier to cope with them—particularly when the boys were away. Notwithstanding, respect for and obedience to me, their instructress, would never be counted amongst their merits.

‘Betty, here’s a note for you!’ was the remark with which they saluted me, and Fanny handed me one. She watched me attentively as I read it, and observed to Clara, in what was intended for an undertone—

‘There! I told you she would! As red as a lobster!’

‘But how could you tell?’

‘Oh, I know! As soon as I saw that “Miss B. Howarth,” with the B and the H all running into one, I——”

‘Silence, children! Write your copies.’

They resumed the inscription in their copy-books of the adage, ‘Curiosity is blamable,’ and I read my note. It purported to be written by ‘Mary Entwistle,’ but that good-natured hand never held the pen of so ready a writer as he who inscribed the lines I was reading—

‘MY DEAR BETTY—If you have no better engagement, will you come and have tea with me this afternoon? I suppose the wedding has kept you away. You have not been here for a week. With my love to yourself and your mother.—Your affectionate friend,
‘MARY ENTWISTLE.’

This effusion was dated ‘Ormerod,’ and was almost a facsimile of a pile of similar productions reposing in a drawer in my room, which store was regularly increased in the ratio of one per week.

At dinner-time—we dined in the middle of the day at our house—our party consisted of mother, Clara, Fanny, myself, and Martin. Bobby and Johnny were at school all day in Bolton, and Saxon was there also, conducting one branch of Hugh Entwistle’s business.

Martin and I were once again on speaking terms. He had come to me the day after our quarrel, and apologised so humbly that I weakly burst into tears and forgave him on the spot. The worst of our reconciliations was that they were so soon over.

‘Did you get the note that came for you, Betty?’ asked mother.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you going, Betty?’ inquired Fanny, with laudable curiosity.

‘Going? What do you know about it?’ I demanded.

‘Oh, I know. “Miss B. Howarth,” and a big, red mon—moner—mony gram, on the envelope. And then, if you go, I shall not have such a long music lesson.’

‘What was the monogram, Fanny?’ asked Martin, insidiously.

‘It was “H.E.” he,’ replied Fanny, apparently thinking it a good joke.

Mother smiled her freezing and stately smile.

‘And’ are you going, Betty?’ asked Martin, with much politeness.

‘Why, of course, I always go—every week.’

‘If it is fine I will walk up and fetch you home this evening, shall I?’

‘Oh, there is not the least need, thanks. A walk will do the boys good. Mother, you might tell Johnny and Bobby to come for me—about nine, you know.’

‘Oh, if you don’t want me!’ said Martin, sullenly.

‘My dear Martin, Betty would hardly be so rude,’ said mother.

‘But I am so rude, mother, dear; Martin always says he hates going to Ormerod, and I object to people making martyrs of themselves for me.’

‘Martyrs——’ said Clara, ‘what is that?’

‘You silly!’ retorted her more accomplished sister.

‘Oh, I remember. A man they threw stones at till he was dead. But how could Martin——’

‘Stupid!’ said Fanny, with the usual impatience of ignorance towards ignorance that is greater than itself. ‘Saint Stephen was the first martyr. They used to cut some of them in pieces, and saw them in two, but now there are none.’

‘Oh yes, there are!’ said Martin, who had been listening grimly to the altercation. ‘Martyrs now are very hard to tell from other people. Every time a person has to do what he does not like, he is a martyr.’

‘Then I am one often—every music-lesson, every French-verb time,’ reflected Fanny, aloud, and became lost in profound thought upon the subject.

Martin on his way to the office came to me as I stood in the garden after dinner.

‘Betty, mayn’t I come for you? I promise to behave like an angel all the time I am there.’

‘That means to say that you will not utter a word, but will sit scowling until I think you are turning into—a—well, a gorilla, and it makes me so nervous that I don’t know what to do,’ said I, remembering the many occasions on which Martin had behaved in that agree-

able manner, and ardently desiring that this visit might not be so spoiled.

‘ Ah, I forgot ! Two is company, but three is none. I will keep out of the way.’

‘ You are very tiresome. Pray come, if you like. It makes no difference to me.’

Without a word, for or against, he was gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

My walk to Ormerod lay across fields, up a pleasant roughly-wooded clough or thrutch, down which flowed a brawling small stream, polluted by dark-red dye from the fulling mill hard by, and so up a pleasant, sunny road—the road beside which stood Bentfoot Church—that scene of sermons and slumberings. The scene of my weekly tea-drinking with Mrs. Entwistle—a custom established since our visit to Southport—was a brown stone house, with a roof of tiles to match. There were clumsy old square brown gate-posts, and the wall dividing the garden from the road was brown too.

Leaving my hat and mantle in the hall, I went into the parlour, where Mrs. Entwistle always sat. How well I knew this room! It was low-ceiled and long; with windows looking south-east down the vale. There was the queer old looking-glass in a venerable frame of black wood and tarnished gilding over the mantelpiece; the mahogany horsehair-covered chairs and sofa with which John and Mary Entwistle had started house-keeping; the numberless little daguerreotypes and silhouettes hanging over the mantelpiece on either side the mirror—the old, worn things which Mrs. Entwistle could by no means part with, contrasting with the handsome new things bought for luxury and convenience, which had been added to them. All these things were there, and the figure that seemed inseparable from them; but opposite to her was another figure, whose face I instantly recognised—it was she whom

Alizon, Ralph, and I had met walking on Blackrigg with her cousin Hugh—it was Hectorina Taylor.

‘Well, Betty, my dear, here you are! I’m glad to see you. Sit down, and tell us all your news about the wedding.’

‘Not so fast, aunt,’ said Miss Taylor, speaking in a soft, rather contralto voice, and with the slow, southern accent which has to northern ears so unaccountable a drawl. ‘You have not introduced us yet.’

‘No more I have. Well, Ina knows you well enough, Betty, by report, but you won’t know so much of her. My niece, Miss Taylor.’

Miss Taylor and I shook hands in true country fashion, and my eyes dwelt with pleasure upon her frank, handsome face and soft brown eyes.

‘You’re quite surprised, I see,’ said Mrs. Entwistle. ‘I told Hugh you would be so glad to find some one like yourself to speak to instead of nothing but Hugh and me, which is so dull for you.’ Miss Taylor smiled. ‘She came yesterday afternoon, and now, my dear, let us hear all about the wedding.’

‘Did you not go to see it?’

‘Oh yes, I went. And a very pretty wedding too. Have you heard from your sister yet?’

I gave Mrs. Entwistle a full account of the wedding and the guests, with a short biography of each stranger, so far as I was acquainted with their antecedents—and of the dance.

‘But did not Mr. Entwistle tell you about the dance? He was there.’

‘Scarcely a word. I asked him who was there, and he said—now, what do you think he said?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He said Betty Howarth was there, and Martin Lancaster;’ and Mrs. Entwistle looked in what was intended for a very sly way at me.

‘Did he?’ said I, feeling myself becoming, as Fanny would say, ‘as red as a lobster.’ ‘And so we were.’

‘I asked him if no one else was there, and he said, “Oh, yes, Miss Howarth was there.” And I hear that there were two young ladies who looked very pretty. We won’t say more, and we won’t say who were the belles of the ball—will we, Hectorina?’

‘Perhaps we hardly need, aunt.’

‘Ah, we always know when the cap fits,’ said Mrs. Entwistle, laughing with intense enjoyment.

‘I assure you, Mrs. Entwistle——’

‘Oh, yes, yes, no doubt. I mention no names. And how did Miss Bamford look?’

I hastened to reply. These wedding details lasted until Mrs. Entwistle proposed an adjournment to the other room before tea was brought in.

Shortly before tea-time Hugh arrived, and when the meal was over, he proposed that we should go into the garden. Miss Taylor and I accompanied him, and Mrs. Entwistle stood watching us from the window.

Hectorina and her cousin proceeded to almost quarrel about the desirability or not of having a croquet lawn at Ormerod—he saying that there was no one to play there, and she asseverating that she came every three years, and stayed a month, and had fully expected to find a croquet ground in readiness for her this time. Then she lingered behind to gather some mignonette, and we went on alone.

‘What a splendid name your cousin has!’ said I. ‘So grand!’

‘A fine, sonorous, imposing name. It fills the mouth, and gives one the idea of a queenly-looking person. Hec—tor—ina, very noble! You do amuse me with your love for high-sounding names.’

‘You would like long, fine names if you were called Betty.’

‘Should I? I suppose, if you had had the choosing of your own name——’

‘Oh, I should have had Diana, or Beatrice, or Adelaide.’

'Or Medora, for example.'

'Ah! you cannot make me cry by talking about *Medora* now,' said I proudly, happy in my case-hardened condition.

'And when you first put me in the wrong, it was not for the last time,' he observed, and added, with a quick look at me—

'Have you and Martin made up your quarrel yet?'

'Martin and I? Our quarrel?'

'I think you did quarrel on the night of the dance.'

'I—we——' I murmured, remembering the cause of our quarrel, and feeling convinced that he too guessed something of it, if he did not know all.

'I would not boast about *Medora*,' he observed. 'The years that bring the philosophic mind are a good way off yet in your case.'

'No; I am no philosopher. I leave that to Alizon. Mr. Labatt has found an apt pupil in her for his advanced theories.'

'Mr. Labatt—tell me about him,' said he, with sudden interest. 'I have never really heard much about him. What is he?'

'A philosopher with a large fortune. It must be so easy to be a philosopher if you have plenty of money. He is very fond of scientific studies too—goes in for evolution and the equality of the sexes.'

'Ah—h!' said Hugh, as if suddenly enlightened. 'Is he a real, *bona-fide* Women's Rights man, or does he only pretend?'

'Oh no! He does not pretend at all.'

'I was going to say that to me that quite accounts for your sister's admiration for Mr. Labatt.'

'Yes,' said I; 'she allows him to domineer over her, because he says she is as good as a man, and that women in the abstract are capable of as much as men in the abstract. Now, I do believe Alizon would dislike a far less rigid, severe kind of man, if she thought he con-

descended to her. I never knew such a girl for independence.'

Looking up, I saw him ; his face flushed a little with some feeling that my words appeared to have excited.

'So I should imagine' was all he said.

'Mr. Labatt is writing a book,' I proceeded, 'and Alizon says it is a very clever book.'

'Dear me! How old is he?'

'Forty-two in years, but a sage in mind ; so Alizon says.'

'I suppose she was laughing.'

'I am quite sure she was not. Those were her very words, and I am certain she never spoke more hearty ones.'

'She can be eloquent when she chooses—I know,' said he, in a low voice. 'Well—Miss Howarth may play at philosophy, but she is no philosopher—no stoic, at any rate.'

'Alizon is so clever,' said I, fondly.

'She is. Behind all your words and phrases, I often detect a shadow, as it were, of your sister's mind, which shows what power she has had over you. I often know that what I say will be silently judged by something which she has said before. My opinion is nothing to her, of course, but I am sure she often influences your opinion of me.'

'How do you know that your opinion is nothing to her?' I asked, grown bold and audacious under the influence of his calm and gentle manner, and putting into one short question the pith of a host of surmises, guesses, and shadowy wonderings which had long floated about my mind.

We were standing in the garden behind the house, leaning against a low stone wall, behind which rose a moor, yellow with gorse, purple with heather, and covered with an undergrowth of tough, gray-green bents, whose faces the wind had turned towards their mother-earth.

I looked straight up into his face awaiting his answer. He looked at me for a moment, and lifted his hat from his head, and sighed, as is the wont of an embarrassed man.

‘How do I know? Suppose she told me so?’

‘She would not be so——’ I began, confusedly.

‘So rude, you were going to say. I do not know whether it was rude or not. Your sister has a way of saying very plain things—truths, perhaps—in a very terse and stinging manner.’

‘I know she has,’ I replied, and I grew more embarrassed, as my vague suspicion took more definite form and shape. As he paused, I made a desperate effort, and said, in a palpably forced and unnatural manner—

‘Look at those sheep coming down the hill. How——’

‘Suppose we never mind the sheep, Betty. We can see them any day—and I will tell you what I mean. Do you remember once saying to me that you could not imagine why Alizon disliked me so much?’

‘Oh yes!’

‘Well, you have wondered the same thing often since then; you have puzzled your brains over it many a time. You have hesitated to mention her name, for fear of giving me pain—for you hate to give pain, Betty.’

‘I don’t know,’ said I, doubtfully, not looking up.

‘Do not be at the trouble of denying it, and—do look up, Betty!’

I did look up, and found his eyes fixed upon me, and a decided smile on his lips, and then I looked down again, feeling, I knew not why, as if I would give the world to be somewhere else, and yet—would I, if I could, go away.

‘Do not look so awfully anxious to run away,’ he went on, as he deliberately seated himself on the top of the low wall. ‘I see you would give anything to escape to my mother and Hectorina; but if I ask you, will you not hear what I have to say, and think about it

afterwards—it will not take you long ; it will put you right on certain points, and it will gratify me.’

‘I am quite ready.’

‘You are very docile,’ said he, still smiling. ‘Your sister dislikes me because, some three or four years ago, she not caring a straw for me, I asked her, not merely to care for me, but to love me. I asked her to be my wife. She was unhappy at home. I did not know that, but she thought I did, and, misunderstanding some expressions of mine, she was convinced that I asked her out of pity, or because I was vain and certain that she would accept me with pleasure. I told you she could be eloquent. Her words then were eloquent, though they were few, and since that unlucky day she has never, in spite of her philosophy, been able to forgive me.’

He ceased, and I industriously picked small pieces of mortar from the interstices of the wall, and studied intently the mossy covering on the top of the brown stones. This was what I had expected to hear, but oh! the misery of knowing that he had chosen to tell me! I appreciated his motive. He wished to show me that he had never voluntarily, in word or deed, slighted my sister. He spoke with admiration of her eloquence. Did he feel it, did he love it yet?

‘You do not say anything, my—Betty.’

‘I say—I say—oh, I am very sorry.’

‘For me? Thanks!’

‘No, no! I am not eloquent. But—Alizon. You see, you did not know her very well then. You did not know how quick her temper is, and what a warm heart she has. Oh, dear! She may have done wrong, but she is so clever and so good. You should not think of her like other people. Oh, what a pity that you should think ill of her—you, of all people!’

‘I think ill of her! You never were more mistaken, in your life. I have the deepest admiration and respect for her. Indeed, Betty, you wrong me, and I did not

mean to make you cry. I assure you there is no need for it.'

Remembering that I should have to appear later before the eyes of Mrs. Entwistle and Miss Taylor, I dried my eyes, and looked across the rough bent that sloped before us.

'And now that I have told you what I never told to any one else,' broke in Hugh's deep, soft voice, 'tell me whether you blame me. Do you think as she did—that I would have asked her that question from motives of pity or vanity?'

He bent towards me, and laid his hand upon mine. As I looked into his face for one moment, I wondered how Alizon could have resisted that pleader.

But it was a hard question for me to answer. If I say 'No,' I admit that when he asked Alizon to marry him he loved her. If he loved her then, why not now? She is much more beautiful and more accomplished than she was then. If I give my assent to her idea that he spoke from self-confidence, vanity, offensive pity, why, then, farewell my ideal Hugh Entwistle, who, whatever his other faults, was neither vain nor impertinent.

'You are very long in answering,' he said, in a voice which startled me. 'Look at me, and try to believe in me.'

I complied, and my doubts vanished like chaff before the wind.

'Alizon was mistaken,' said I. 'Yes—I believe you. You asked her because you—loved her.'

'I thank you,' was all he said. Did he know that in answering him thus I was very miserable; that never a quarrel with Martin, never a parting from my brothers, never anything, had left so dull, so dead a pain as the acknowledgment I had just made?

Perhaps he did know, as he held my hand, and I wished he would not look at me. My face, I felt, said too much.

'Hugh! Hugh!' cried Hectorina's voice, from the

front garden, and she presently appeared, followed by two well-known forms—my angel Johnny—my darling Bobby.

‘Has not Martin come with you?’ I asked, indifferently.

‘Martin told us to give you a message,’ said Johnny. ‘His respects; and as you did not care a pin whether he came for you or not, he has gone to the top of Black-rigg instead. And he hasn’t been there since you went with him.’

‘The quarrel is not made up!’ murmured Hugh in my discomfited ear.

‘This Martin must be a very extraordinary character,’ said Hectorina, drawing my arm within hers, and leading me away to cover my confusion.

‘Does he care for Alizon yet?’ I think, as we go towards the house. ‘Surely he must! She is as much better than I, in every way, as light is better than darkness.’

CHAPTER XXVII

THE month of June came to a close, and still Martin and I were estranged. Ever since the evening on which he had sent me so insulting, so openly jealous a message, I had been too deeply offended to attempt any reconciliation, and he had kept aloof in haughty silence, or what seemed such. These terms were uncomfortable enough, but even they were more agreeable to me than the incessant petty bickerings which used to be perpetually going on between us—always upon the same topic—Hugh Entwistle ; Martin's jealousy of him.

I could no longer be blind, as I was two years ago. I knew, and was anything but happy in knowing, that Martin had chosen to fall in love with me, or what he considered to be in love ; that he was of a very jealous temperament ; that all the jealousy of which he was capable was concentrated upon Hugh Entwistle ; that my agreeable dreams of a lifelong Platonic association with Martin had proved baseless, because he at least would have no such thing.

A pretty situation, no doubt, for a romance, but a truly wretched one for me. Martin's love and jealousy—if that which a boy of twenty feels can be dignified with such titles—displayed themselves in constant spiteful remarks, in sneers, in pointedly leaving the room whenever the object of his dislike entered it, or in still more pointedly pressing attentions upon the unhappy object of his liking. His jealousy was absurd, vain, obtrusive, ludicrous, vexing—in a word it was Martinian.

I no longer needed to appeal in wondering ignorance to Hugh to tell me the meaning of Martin's wayward moods. I held the key of the riddle in my own hands, and was not happy in the possession.

I eschewed Martin's company as much as possible, and went on teaching Clara and Fanny geography, grammar, and history, plodding myself at decimals and a little algebra, under Johnny's contemptuous tuition—when he could be got to give it me, and I began to wish that I too could get away from Hamerton, and to wonder whether such a thing were quite impracticable. Little did I think once that I should ever look upon our damp green fields, and gray harsh moors, with the wish to lose sight of them!

'Betty,' said my mother at tea-time, one evening, 'if you go to prayers to-night, call at Fosshouse on your way back. It is a long time since you went to see Sydney.'

'Yes, mother,' said I, and at the appointed time I possessed myself of my prayer-book, and took my way to the Friday-evening service.

There were very few people there, and the service was short. When it was over, I took my way to Fosshouse, and found Sydney in the garden, talking to her brother, to Hectorina, and to Hugh Entwistle; the two latter having dined with our friends.

'Ah, Betty! just the person I wanted to see,' said Sydney. 'Where have you come from?'

Not wishing to obtrude my superior piety in any disagreeable manner, I merely held up my prayer-book without speaking.

'To church! A walk would have done you more good. You look tired and pale, Betty; what is the matter?'

'Nothing. I am as well as ever I was.' Ralph put his hands upon my shoulders, and coerced me gently into his chair, and Sydney went on—

'Have you heard from Alizon lately?'

'No; we were wondering why she had not written.'

'She and Mr. and Miss Labatt are all coming to stay here.'

'Oh, are they? Shall I see Mr. Labatt at last?'

'Why, do you want to see him?'

'Very much.'

As I spoke, I encountered Hugh's eyes, and the remembrance of my last conversation with him occurred to me. Perhaps he too might have some curiosity to see Mr. Labatt.

'Well, you will see him!' said Sydney. 'I was amused with Alizon—she seemed so fascinated with him and his ideas. It was all a kind of mild cynicism and *laissez faire*, and——'

'The "nothing's true, and it does not matter" style of thing,' suggested Hugh.

'Exactly. But mark my words. Those people who are always boasting of having no feelings, and not caring for any one, are just the people whose feelings are too many for them when the time comes.'

I was desirous of defending my sister, but could not tell how to do it. I therefore said, doubtfully—

'She is not quite without feelings. She has feelings for Mr. Labatt, at any rate.'

The chorus of laughter which greeted this announcement revealed to me how stupid I had been, and I blushed painfully as I remembered how vexed Alizon herself would have been at my awkwardness. I looked at Hugh again. He was not laughing—far from it; his lips looked ready for anything rather than a smile.

'I did not mean——' began I.

'Oh, we know what you mean,' said Sydney, still laughing.

The conversation then turned again upon Mr. Labatt and his opinions, and I discreetly held my peace for the remainder of my visit, and, as soon as I could, said I must go.

Sydney kissed me with her usual hearty kindness, saying—

‘Thank goodness, child, that you have escaped philosophy, and don’t care about it.’

‘I do care about it,’ I hastened to answer. ‘At least, if I were as clever as Alizon I should.’

Ralph being engaged in an animated conversation with Hectorina, Hugh walked with me to the gate. Those big iron gates! How well I knew them, with their great gilt L. on one division and B. on the other, the mystic sign of the house of Ledgard-Bamford. Hugh pushed one open for me, and stood holding it back, bareheaded, and looking, to my sentimental eyes, very handsome and very attractive, as he paused and said to me—

‘Betty, you are very loyal. It does one good to hear you.’

‘Loyal—how?’

‘To Aliz—to your sister.’

‘Because I admire her, and think more of her than of any one, almost.’

‘Than of any one almost,’ he began—but there may be limits, even to sisterly loyalty. I could not discuss Alizon with him. I could not gratify him—much as I delighted to do so, by chanting a pæan in her praise.

‘It will be dark if I stay any longer.’

‘True,’ said he, taking the hand I extended. ‘You did not come to see my mother last Thursday.’

‘Did I not? Oh, I forgot, I suppose.’

‘You are the very worst hand that ever lived at telling an untruth. I remember your once trying very hard to tell me a falsehood. I asked you if you remembered something, and you said “No,” but it was as if you had said “Yes,” fifty times. And you know that you did not forget.’

‘I shall be left in the dark unless I go home at once.’ and the fields are lonely.’

‘You did not forget.’

'It is rude to contradict.'

'Then why did you not come?'

'Oh—I don't know.'

'Please tell me the reason, Betty.'

'There was no reason. Simply I did not come.'

'Then I should say, simply, you ought to come as soon as possible. My mother was quite hurt,' said he, unblushingly.

'Oh, if I had supposed she would miss me, I would not for the world—but I thought as Miss Taylor was there, I might be——'

'Might be——'

'In the way, as you will insist upon knowing.'

'Betty, you shock me. You are never in the way in my house.'

'Oh! I'll try to remember,' said I, at last succeeding in escaping.

A few days later, Saxon, Martin, and I repaired to Fosshouse, to 'dine, and meet a few friends,' the 'few friends' consisting of Mr. and Miss Labatt and others. After Martin had discovered that the roses I wore had been sent from Ormerod, and had spitefully informed me that they did not suit me at all, and that he could have got me some much nicer ones if I had told him; after Saxon had severely criticised my dress—he had begun to display that sure sign of coming manhood—a deep interest in his sisters' toilette; after these ceremonies, we departed, and presently arrived at Fosshouse.

Miss Delia Labatt, to whom I was introduced immediately, was exactly what Alizon had pictured her; after talking with her for a few moments I felt as if I had known her all my life. She was very kind and good-hearted, with all her oddities. I had been talking with her some little time, when a gentleman came up and seated himself beside us.

'Regifald,' said Miss Labatt, laying her hand upon his, 'this is Betty—Alizon's favourite sister.'

He shook hands with me, and I answered his greetings almost confusedly, for I was surprised. This Mr. Labatt! Why, then, did Alizon and the Bamfords always speak of him as if he had come out of the ark? I beheld a man in the very prime of mind and body. He stooped a little, certainly, but so do most men who think and study much. Hugh Entwistle stooped—sometimes. Mr. Labatt was not handsome—far from it, and he had a wrinkled brow and lines about his mouth, and overhanging eyebrows. But the splendid intelligence of the face would make up for any want of beauty—nay, would far outweigh the charms of the most splendid Antinous without brains, and if the face were plain the eyes were magnificent. Brilliant, dark, keen, and flashing, they fastened upon my face with the glance of an eagle. I thought that Mr. Labatt probably smiled seldom, though he did smile when his sister introduced me; a sweeter, more melancholy, haunting smile was never seen. He looked reserved, and I knew that he was so. That sorrowful deed in the background of his life added to his natural taciturnity. He was not abstracted, though, and to my shy and unaccustomed eyes was rather imposing and awe-inspiring. He was that thing which I had seldom, if ever seen—a stately, well-born, highly-bred gentleman—a man whom I could imagine to be easily feared, but not so easily loved.

‘I am glad to meet you,’ said he. ‘I have often heard of you from your sister.’

At that moment, Martin Lancaster came up, his face wearing an ill-concealed smile.

‘Betty, dinner is announced, and I am desired to take you in. May I have the pleasure?’

‘You, Martin!’

‘I, even I; do you object?’

‘Miss Howarth, will you introduce this young gentleman?’ said Mr. Labatt, and I, feeling a proper thrill of emotion, performed the ceremony.

'I knew your father and mother,' said Mr. Labatt. 'That is why I wish to make your acquaintance.'

Martin bowed, but was too anxious to carry me off to dinner to enter into particulars.

That was not a happy evening to me. Alizon and Hugh Entwistle went in to dinner together, and had apparently forgotten their differences, for the conversation between them never for a moment flagged. They sat opposite to Martin and me, and I, watching them intently if stealthily, thought Alizon very gracious, and was certain I detected admiration in Hugh's eyes.

'Well, I need not be surprised,' I said to myself. 'She is not a girl to be lightly forgotten. If he does love her still, what wonder? And she, now that she is wiser, will soon learn to care for him, and they will be—exactly suited to one another.'

I tried to congratulate myself upon such a happy termination to their quarrel, but only found that I had lost all appetite, and that I could with difficulty succeed in paying a reasonable amount of attention to the incessant talk of Martin at my side.

When dinner was over, I drifted away to a side table, and looked, or seemed to look, at the photographs and picture-books scattered upon it. What I was chiefly conscious of was the fact that Alizon and Hugh were still deep in conversation, and that Mr. Labatt had joined them. I watched them intently. Mr. Labatt a scientific machine! Nothing of the kind; he was a very mortal man, if he did but know it. I struggled to maintain intact that loyalty on which Hugh had complimented me, but I found it difficult—more and more difficult as I watched Hugh's face. Surely Alizon, if she did not care for him, need not be so very gracious as she was. It was not fair. From some such thoughts as these I was roused by Martin, who joined me, and I, for once, yielding to him, we remained seated in our corner, looking at photographs, and, to all appearance, flirting desperately.

During the evening Hugh spared about five minutes from his absorbing conversation with Alizon and Mr. Labatt to come and speak to me. Hectorina sang a song or two, and then we walked home together across the moonlit fields, Saxon talkative and amiable, Martin quiet, and I, Betty, as dull as dull could be.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OUR dissipations at Hamerton were so few and far between that a bazaar was counted to be an affair of some importance, and when Miss Labatt, at the end of a month, began to say that they must go home again, Sydney positively refused to hear anything about such a project, alleging that they must stay till the bazaar was over, though, as she privately remarked to me, 'they were not people who went in for that kind of thing at all.' They, however, yielded to her persuasions that they should remain, and her object was gained.

Saturday afternoon is the great time for bazaars in Lancashire—particularly in a country district of Lancashire like that in which we lived. There was no very large public room in Hamerton; therefore a manufacturer of the place had laid at our disposal a large, empty weaving shed. It was rather an uncouth-looking place, with its not very lofty roof adorned with wheels and some dangling straps; but we had done it up as gaily as we could, with pink and white muslin and glazed calico, and the frequenters of the bazaar were too deeply engaged in the exciting pursuits of buying and selling—'cheating and being cheated,' as Ralph mournfully remarked, to notice deficiencies of architecture or furniture.

It was half-past four on Saturday afternoon, and the room was uncomfortably full and hot. The holiday factory hands were beginning to stream in, and if their numbers continued to increase in the present ratio, there would soon be a crush.

I was seated behind Sydney's stall ; she and I both feeling exceedingly weary. The demand for our wares had been growing fainter and fainter, and we surveyed with somewhat desponding eyes the large surplus of cushions, antimacassars, dolls, fender-stools, and other impedimenta, hoping against hope that some one might be induced to purchase them, but fain to confess, as we looked at the good-natured factory lads and lasses in their Sunday clothes, that they were not exactly 'likely customers.'

'Oh !' sighed Sydney, throwing herself back, and fanning herself, 'how sick of it I am ! I will never do it again—never !'

As this had been her cry about once an hour ever since the bazaar opened, I had grown too accustomed to it to notice it much. Suddenly she started up, upsetting a quantity of things, ornamental and useless, and, rushing to the front, signalled wildly over the heads of a body of young women, who were turning over everything, admiring, abusing, but buying—never !

'Mr. Entwistle !' she cried out. 'Mr. Entwistle, do come here ? Oh !' she turned to me with a groan—'our only hope, and he will not look !'

We watched him regretfully as he went in the distance, like Saul, 'a head and shoulders' above the rest of the tribes. Thanks to that superior height, he perceived Sydney's signal, as he happened to turn round, and obeyed her gesticulating hand.

'If you would bring me and Betty a cup of tea, Mr. Entwistle, we would thank you and bless you on our knees. We are alone. Ralph has gone home ; he said the whole concern was a gigantic swindle, and he could stand it no longer. Miss Delia had had quite enough of it, and she has gone with him. Alizon and Mr. Labatt have never been near——'

'But they are coming to-night, when their work is done,' I interposed.

'Yes, when everything is dishevelled and disordered

—to make fun of the bazaar, the people, and the things. Martin—I don't know where Martin is. And Betty's brothers are doing raffles for me, or I would not have troubled you.'

'Two cups of tea—you shall have them.'

He went away, and we sat still, watching the people. A working-man came, paused before the front of the stall, and surveyed a large cardboard 'tidy,' adorned with small coloured pictures in the Dolly Varden style.

'Eh, but I could like yon thing!' he remarked. 'It's just reet size for't wife to put her chignon in.'

Excited by a faint hope that he would buy, I advanced and asked if I could show him anything.

'Ay! Tell me th' price o' yon bag, theer, or whatever yo' co'n it?'

'This—two and sixpence,' said I, examining the ticket.

'I'st tak' it' was the satisfactory and laconic answer, as he rattled down half-a-crown, received the cardboard case which he destined for such a curious purpose, and went away—possibly to explain to his wife what he meant her to do with it.

'Noble fellow!' murmured Sydney. 'I wish there were a few more like him. If there were, perhaps we might get rid of that awful cushion, Betty—the blue and yellow, you know. Put it to the front, at any rate. Let it see the light of day. I believe Mrs. Openshaw would have bought it yesterday if I would have given her a muslin cover in with it; but that was too much, and I declined to do it.'

'Here, Sydney!' cried Bobby, coming up, grinning, and crimson under the weight of a large chintz-covered berceauunette, 'I've finished this raffle, all but one share. Will you have it?'

'I, child! What should induce me to put in for a baby's cradle? Let it go! I don't mind.'

'Well, Mr. Entwistle will come and work off the raffle for me, while I ring the bell. I'll ring the bell.'

Of course he would. He had rung it on every opportunity throughout the day, and he intended to ring it all the way back to Leverhouse that evening. Mr. Entwistle consented to superintend the 'working off' of the raffle. The tickets were counted, and I, Betty, was elected to draw. Bobby rang his bell vigorously, and a crowd collected rapidly.

'Number eighty-four,' said I, reading the number on the ticket.

'Num—ber—eighty-four,' sang out Bobby, at the top of his voice—'a beautiful berceaunette!'

Hugh read the list, till his eye fell upon the name opposite the figure eighty-four, and he smiled as he announced—

'Miss Martha Mounsey!'

'Miss Mounsey! Oh, my eye! What a lark!' said Bobby, *sotto voce*; and then he repeated the name of the winner and the nature of the prize at the very top of his voice.

'Here she comes!' he said, turning to us, as Miss Martha's severe countenance, wearing a shade of anxiety, was seen nearing the stall; she being closely followed by her two sisters.

'Now, Miss Mounsey, here you are! Isn't it lovely?' And he stooped from his lofty post and held out the cradle to her, in the attitude of one bestowing a blessing.

'Oh, sisters!' cried Miss Mounsey, 'see what I have won! This lovely berceaunette! Thank you, Master Bobby. It will just do for nice Mary Penny's baby. Most gratifying, I'm sure!'

'Very, Martha!' replied her sisters.

With more murmured words of pleasure, Miss Martha bestowed her treasure in a safe place, and departed, and Sydney and I drank our tea, when suddenly there appeared before the stall an excited-looking young lady, with her dress tucked up in a business-like manner, very untidy hair, paper and

pencil in hand. She was followed by a boy, carrying a Britannia metal teapot, and she paused before our stall, and began to speak in a very loud voice.

'Now do just put in for this, Miss Bamford! It's so pretty, and it's only twopence—only twopence for this sweet thing. Mr. Entwistle, you must put in. You can't say twopence is anything to you.'

'It seems to be something to you,' he murmured aside, as he produced the large sum required.

Miss Fletcher spent some time in emphatic demands for 'only twopence' from the rest of our party, and then disappeared, to our great relief.

'Betty, have you been raffling things?' asked Hugh, with strong distaste to the whole proceedings in his voice, as he followed me to the corner where my chair stood.

'No.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'Why?'

'Don't you think it is odious? What an object that girl looked! Don't—please, don't!'

'Suppose I go round with the coffee-pot to match Miss Fletcher's teapot, and ask you for only twopence. Will you give it me?'

'I hope you will not ask me.'

'Perhaps I may. Oh, there is Mrs. Entwistle and Hectorina.'

I went out to them, and Mrs. Entwistle met me with the words—

'Eh, dear! What a confusion, to be sure. I can't stay long, but Hugh said I must come and spend some money; so now, my dear, take me to any stall you like, that I may buy something, and get done.'

In my mind's eye were numerous cushions, ottomans, etc., whose unsold and apparently unsaleable condition weighed heavily upon Sydney's and my mind. I therefore promptly led her to our stall, and displayed the things we had on hand for her consideration.

'But I don't want any of these,' said she. "These are not the things young ladies like—unless they are thinking of setting up housekeeping. Nay, my dear, you don't really want that ottoman for yourself, do you?"

'I thought you wanted something for yourself, Mrs. Entwistle.'

'Nay, not I! What should an old woman like me want with such things? I said as I had to buy something, I'd please myself about it, and try to give some pleasure to others, which wouldn't be the case if I bought a fender-stool for the drawing-room, for Hugh hates them; he says they are inventions of the—well, you know young men do get impatient sometimes. And I am going to divide my money, and half will buy something for you, and half will buy something for Ina. Come and let us look somewhere else, and, Hugh, you had better come with us and help us to choose.'

I saw a glance exchanged between Miss Taylor and her cousin.

'No, aunt. Betty and I will stay here; you go and choose for us. I don't like having to choose things.'

Ready to do whatever was decided as best for her, Mrs. Entwistle obediently followed her tall son, and I was left with the conviction that, whoever might give me a present, whether Hectorina shared it or not, it would be Hugh's gift.

About eight o'clock, Ralph, Alizon, and Mr. Labatt appeared upon the scene, looking very decidedly as if they were on an errand of duty, not one of pleasure. They arrived at our stall while Sydney was negotiating with Johnny, Bobby, and another boy, who were making loud protests that if she would only allow them they would sell off the remainder of her things by auction in no time.

Wearied to death with her exertions, seduced by their confident promises, and eager for the glory of being able to say, 'My stall was entirely cleared,' she at last consented, and the three boys commenced their work.

Bobby at one end of the stall, had taken charge of a galvanic battery, and was inducing every one he could, by the most specious promises that they should feel nothing but what was nice, to come and be galvanised at the rate of sixpence a head. Johnny and his friend commenced operations by endeavouring to dispose of a number of crocheted babies' caps of a peculiarly hideous kind. Johnny poised one in his hand; turned it in every variety of attitude, and loudly chanted its praises to a young woman with a baby in her arms, who, attracted by the catchword 'half price,' had come up and looked critically at the article. Johnny displayed it to every advantage, and finally set it upon the back of his own head, and tied the woollen strings beneath his chin, with a ravishing smile, saying—

'I'm giving it away when I say eightpence; I am indeed.'

A long pause of consideration on the part of the young woman, who at last shook her head, and remarked—

'Nay! They'n gotten some at Openshaw's for sixpence. I'st go and have a look at them, I reckon.'

'Don't let Mrs. Openshaw undersell you in that way!' urged Johnny's friends, and he, summoning all his inventive powers to his aid, said—

'Just listen to me, ma'am. Those other caps are made of flannel, with frill round them—a very inferior kind of cap to this. Don't you see that this is a much more wholesome kind of cap? It has small quadrangle apertures to admit the air to the head. Without air, man and beast, and baby too, would die—and your baby is absolutely asking you to buy it.'

He dangled it engagingly before the infant, which immediately clenched its fists and roared, being apparently on the verge of convulsions.

'I'st buy it,' said the young woman, in an awe-struck tone. She then gave Johnny the baby to hold, while she produced from an underpocket a great number of

coppers, which she laid upon the stall, took up the cap and departed.

Bobby, tired of his galvanic battery, came up to me, and asked if I would go and see Punch and Judy, in an adjoining room, very handsomely offering to treat me if I would.

'Oh, I should like to go,' said I, longingly, and as Ralph, Sydney, and Mr. Entwistle also agreed to go, we went across the room for that purpose.

As we went slowly along, Martin met us.

'Where are you going?' he asked, quickly.

'Going to see Punch and Judy, Martin,' I answered, in high glee. 'You come, too!' and I held out my hand to him.

'Is he going?' he asked, with a significant glance at Hugh.

'Yes.'

'Humph!' said Martin, walking away with a shrug of the shoulders.

I found that advancing years had deprived Punch and Judy of some of its charms for me, yet I enjoyed it, and was sorry when it was over.

When we returned to the stall, we found Johnny engaged in trying to persuade Mr. Labatt—no less a personage—to buy a small green brigand hat, of which article we had quite a stock, supplied by a liberally disposed hatter of Bolton. Mr. Labatt was politely endeavouring to evade the purchase, and Alizon, turning to me, gave me a small parcel, saying—

'Betty, Mrs. Entwistle told me to give you this, with her love.'

I received the parcel, and retired to the other end of the stall to open it. It was a jeweller's case, as I perceived when I removed the wrapper.

'But how could she get this at a bazaar?' I asked of Hugh, who had followed me, and who stood by, looking on.

'At Mrs. Carston's stall they have a lot of jewellery,

and hardly any of it sold, of course. Look at it, and see how you like it.'

I opened the case and found within it a bracelet of Indian workmanship. It was of gold, with coloured enamel in a pattern; a much more beautiful and expensive thing than I had ever expected to possess.

'How beautiful!' I said, almost in a whisper.

'Then may I tell my mother you like it?'

'How could I help liking it?'

'Let me put it on,' said he; 'I want to see how it looks. Then I can give a proper account of it, you know.'

I held out my hand, and he clasped the bracelet round my wrist and looked thoughtfully at it, and then at me, with a smile.

'Very pretty. I am sure you would give my mother a kiss for this, Betty,' he added, raising my hand to his lips.

Lifting my eyes to his, I encountered others, fixed upon my face—Martin's eyes. He stood at a little distance, outside the stall, looking on with an angry sneer, and when he found that we both saw him, he gave a short scornful laugh and turned away.

'Really, that boy is intolerable!' said Hugh, with more temper than I had ever seen him display.

'Yes, he is,' I assented, not looking at him, and slowly returning to the others, my heart beating—perhaps because Martin had startled me by his rudeness.

It was ten o'clock, and the bazaar was not yet over, when Alizon, Mr. Labatt, and I left the room, and walked first to Leverhouse, where they left me, and then, I presume, to Fosshouse, to rejoin Miss Delia, and read an article in the *Fortnightly*.

CHAPTER XXIX

UP to this period of my life, Sunday had always been, to me, *the* day of the week; not, I fear, from any preternatural piety of disposition, but simply because on Sunday all my brothers and sisters were at home. Sunday at Hamerton was generally fine; the factory chimneys did not smoke, except in short spasms, when the stoker was firing up. I had memories of pleasant walks, talks, and doings on Sunday—there was a general peace, calm, and amiability about the day which made me love it. But this Sunday—the day after our bazaar—was destined to be a black day in my calendar, and to make me shiver at the name of Sunday for some time afterwards, by reason of two things which happened to me and mine upon it.

Wearied with my exertions at the bazaar, I did not come down until all the others had gone to church, as I supposed. Then I strolled into the drawing-room, pulled up the blinds, and let the sun stream in. The house was perfectly silent, and I reflected that it would be nearly two hours before any of my kindred would return home from church. I therefore placed myself on the window seat, ostensibly to read—in reality to reflect upon all that had happened, and all I fancied was going to happen, to me and mine.

Thus I was sitting, with my eyes fixed upon Foss-house amidst its trees on the other side of the valley, and idly wondering whether Alizon and Mr. Labatt did read that article in the *Fortnightly*, when the shadow of

some one passing the window was cast over my book and face. Looking up, I found that it was Martin.

‘Good-morning, Martin. Are you not at church?’

‘No,’ said he, indifferently. ‘I fear I only possess the outward qualifications for Christianity.’

‘And what are they?’

‘I’m poor, unlucky, and unhappy.’

‘Bilious or dyspeptic, perhaps you mean.’

‘I can’t recommend you as a preacher, Betty. I fear your talents would be lost in that line.’

‘Very well. You preach! You said just now that you were poor, unlucky, and unhappy. Let us hear the reason of it. And we’ll begin at the beginning. Why are you poor?’

‘Why am I poor? Are you insulting me? Should I be poor if I could help it?’

‘I think,’ I rejoined, hardily, ‘that if you were to work more and grumble less you would not continue always poor. People cannot get rich without working.’

‘Riches, for ever riches! Do you, too, worship the Almighty Dollar to such an extent?’

‘I don’t worship money. But I would rather be well off than poor. And I have known what it is to be poor.’

‘Humph! A man with a large cotton factory or two, and a few thousand looms and spindles, and a few hundred factory hands in his employ, is naturally a more meritorious character than one without looms, spindles, and the rest of it.’

‘If you are going to be rude and ill-natured, I shall go to my room again. I don’t see why my Sunday morning should be spoiled by you.’

‘I won’t. Sit still! Well—I am poor. Let that pass, and never mind when or how it happens to be so. I am unlucky, I said—so I am, despite a piece of what most people call good luck, which has befallen me.’

‘Oh, what?’

‘And unhappy. So I am, very; and it does not lie

in my hands—my happiness or unhappiness. It has gone out of my control, and I cannot guard it.'

'Nonsense!'

'It suits you to say that, but "nonsense" is not much of an argument for or against anything. Betty, what do you think of Miss Delia Labatt?'

'I think her a dear old thing; very funny, but I like her better than her brother.'

'I have had a good many long conversations with her lately.'

'Indeed.'

'Yes. She has told me that she used to know my father and mother, and how my mother was once engaged to her elder brother, who was shot by the present Mr. Labatt in an accident. Good Heavens! Suppose it had been otherwise. I might have been in a higher position in the world now—at this very minute—than that mooning fellow, her brother! My father never told me anything of all this, and my mother is dead. She is very kind and very generous. She has said——'

'What?' I asked, for I saw that a disclosure hung upon his very lips.

'She bade me take a week to consider her proposal. She says that if I would enter the Church, she would send me to college, and—and provide for me until I got a curacy, at least.'

There was a pause. I was too thunderstruck to speak, for a moment. Martin was outside the window, with his elbows on the sill, leaning into the room. He looked anxiously at me—intently.

'Well?' he asked at last.

'I never heard of such a thing! What did she say when you refused?'

'I have not refused—yet.'

'Martin, you are making fun of me. You ought to be ashamed. The Church—you in the Church! It is monstrous.'

'The Church is infinitely preferable, as the pro-

fession of a gentleman, to the cotton trade,' said he, with a sublime sneer. Never had I liked Martin so little as 'at this moment. The whole folly, falsity, and vanity of his theories and character seemed to stand out repulsive and unredeemed.

'How I do hate it!' he went on, 'and all its jargon about warp and weft, and its changes of price by the fraction of a farthing, and the horrid shibboleth of the Manchester and Liverpool Exchanges! Would you have me cling to that in spite of every inducement to desert it?'

'Pray leave the cotton trade, if you like,' said I, 'though my opinion is that people do not generally abuse things in that wholesale way when they understand them. Still, leave the cotton trade if you dislike it so much, but don't talk about entering the Church——'

'From Manchester, or rather Bolton, to Oxford!' he interpolated, with a sneer.

'I never,' said I, emphatically, 'never saw, or heard, or dreamed of any one so little fitted for the Church as you—never; and I believe, if we were both to live to be a thousand years old, I never should. Ralph Bamford would make a better parson than you—Saxon would—anybody would.'

'Then you would have me say to Miss Labatt, "Many thanks, but I am already so admirably well suited to my profession, and my profession to me, that I feel it would break my heart to leave it."'

'Your unfitness for the Church ought to be 'the first and greatest objection. But there are other objections too.'

'Name them, since we are so agreeably and amicably reasoning together.'

'I should fancy Mr. Labatt would not be particularly pleased if his sister did such a thing, and you have no right to strange them; and next, I do not know how you could bear—a young man already earning your

own living—to go and live on the bounty of another—a woman too. I would rather die. You are always talking about your talents being wasted, and that kind of thing, until I begin to think that they are a myth—or else, why don't you display them in overcoming your unreasonable dislike to an honourable pursuit, and endeavouring to master it, and make yourself somebody—at any rate a man.'

'Then you would despise me if I took what Miss Labatt offers?'

'I can hardly tell you how much I should despise you, Martin.'

'You would? You have spoken very plainly. You always do, I notice; particularly to me. I will speak plainly too. Betty, there is only one thing in the world that I really wish for, or care for, and you know what that is. If you would try to care for me ever so little, in ever so long a time, there is nothing I could not do—I would not do.'

Martin's voice deepened to tones more manly than I had ever heard him use before; it ceased, and there was silence. I saw nothing but his face, so eager and so intent, bent upon mine. Oh, for Alizon's philosophy! Oh, to fæel, as she said she did, that when pain was necessary she could give pain or take pain without one pang of compunction!

'Oh, Martin, you know I cannot!' was all I could find to say.

'Think again, Betty. It may be sport to you, but it is death to me, you know.'

Deeply hurt at his persistent insinuation that I was amusing myself with him, I said, almost crying—

'Martin, if you suffer, so do I—horribly.'

'Not at all!' said he, with a sudden change of tone. 'You wish I would go. You wish I would carry myself, and my loneliness, and my inconvenient love for you, to some place where they would never disturb you any more; and the next time Hugh Entwistle's hand

touches yours, you will forget there is such a thing as pain and sorrow in the world. I shall form an amusing topic of conversation, and so I shall have served my purpose to the last.'

'You seem to forget the meaning of manliness and generosity, Martin. I have felt sorry for you, but I cannot feel so any longer. A man would not behave in this fretful, petulant manner, and a gentleman could not say these mean, miserable things to any woman—much less the one he professed to love. I do not love you! I do not care for you, and never shall, in that way, and at present I dislike you excessively. Are you answered now?'

'Your family, from Alison down to Clara, have all a decisive way of expressing their opinions. I am answered. Good-morning.'

Almost before he had ceased to speak, I was alone, and tears—my usual solace—came to my aid. My heart beat painfully, and I began to wish that I had refrained my lips from several too candid observations which I had made to Martin. Thus unhappily I passed the time until my relatives returned from church, when they one and all exclaimed how ill I looked.

'Where's Martin? Is not Martin coming to dinner?' were the questions which came from first one and then another of my brothers and sisters as they took their places round the table, as dinner was begun, and still no Martin appeared. I sat at Saxon's side in silent misery. I knew not what Martin might have done—he might merely have carried himself and his anger away for a few hours, in order to return in the evening and make himself ten times more disagreeable than he was before. But when I remembered his look, as he said, 'I am answered. Good-morning,' I feared something worse.

When the meal was half over, and still he put in no appearance, Saxon asked me if I had seen him that morning.

'Yes,' said I, faintly; 'I saw him.'

'At what time? Was he going out?'

'He was in the garden. He talked to me through the window, and when he went away, he said good-morning. He said nothing about going away,' said I, constrainedly.

'He's got bazaar on the brain,' said Johnny; 'he looked rather wild yesterday, and I say, Betty, Miss Labatt has put your nose out of joint. She and Martin are as thick as possible. Your day is over.'

'Is it?' said I, feebly trying to smile.

'Are you coming to church this afternoon?' Saxon asked me.

'I don't know—yes—perhaps. If it keeps fine.'

'If it keeps fine!' repeated Saxon. 'Why, there isn't a cloud in the sky. It could not rain if it tried.'

He looked towards mother with a half laugh, and I saw, though I pretended I did not—the little frown and shake of the head she bestowed upon him. The result was disastrous—for me, at least. Saxon stared long, first at mother and then at me, and asked, 'What's up!'

Bobby nudged Johnny, and said, 'Did you see mother wink at Saxon? Something's wrong. Don't you think——' Here he shaded his mouth with his hand, looked aside at me, and whispered into Johnny's ear, nodding emphatically the while. The latter made affirmative signs, and this proved the crisis. Agony of mind at their guesses and teasing questions mingled with an overwhelming sense of the utter depravity of mind which could credit the idea of mother winking. The last consideration prevailed. I burst into an hysterical laugh, rose from my chair, and hurried out of the room, faintly hearing the astonished 'My eye!' with which Johnny greeted the proceeding.

A few minutes afterwards, while I was sobbing on my bed, mother's hand was laid upon my shoulder, and her voice said—

'Betty, my child, what does all this mean? Where is Martin? What has happened?'

I poured my story into her ears. She listened gravely, and said at last, 'Of course you did right to speak decidedly, my dear, but I——'

'I know I said wicked things,' said I, 'but he—had no right to speak in that way about—other people.'

I had merely hinted at Martin's taunts on the subject of Hugh Entwistle.

'I shall write to his father if he does not return this evening. But I have no fear of his coming to any harm. He is too genuinely selfish to do anything unpleasant to himself. Perhaps he thinks this will frighten you; but you must not be so much distressed. It will be a good lesson for him, for his behaviour to my poor little girl has really been very trying.' And she smiled.

I was quite sure that mother spoke the truth, though her words fell with somewhat chill effect upon my hot heart.

I remained alone in my room until I heard all the others, with the exception of mother, set off for afternoon church; then, shortly afterwards, hearing a ring at the bell, I peeped cautiously out and saw that the figure standing at the door was that of Mr. Labatt. No doubt he had come to call upon mother; far be it from me to disturb their privacy! I remained where I was, lying upon my bed, with my eyes closed, until the sound of many voices below roused me, and sitting up, I listened to them, and distinguished that of Alizon, then Hugh's, and afterwards his cousin Hectorina's. No doubt they had come with our people from church, and would in all probability stay to tea.

I found that the room was dark, and the sky clouded—a thick thunder-cloud had covered the sun, and when I looked out of the window I perceived that a storm was driving slowly and grandly up the valley from the south.

'So that, after all, Saxon was wrong when he said it could not rain,' I remarked to myself, as I went downstairs to greet the party.

'Mr. Labatt is in the drawing-room with mother,' I observed in an aside to Alizon.

'Oh, is he?' said she, checking herself in her advance to that room.

'We won't disturb them. Let us all go into the garden.'

'Come here,' said Hectorina, drawing me aside. 'I want to know how you like your bracelet.'

'Very much, thank you. It was so kind of Mrs. Entwistle——'

'Of aunt? Oh yes, I daresay! Aunt—of course it was aunt—gave me this locket,' and she showed it me, hanging round her neck. 'So kind of her,' she added.

I laughed too, not quite knowing what other reply to make, and to turn the subject, I remarked—

'You will have to spend the evening here. Look how the storm is coming up. It will break directly.'

We stood and looked down the valley towards the good town of Bolton, whence the dim, smoky clouds, with here and there patches of lurid light—strange and weird, like the lights of a thunderstorm always are—came rolling up.

At this moment we were joined by Alizon, Hugh, and Mr. Labatt, who had left the house, and come out to us. He looked to me much happier than the last time I had seen him. There was even a smile hovering about his lips, and a light in his eyes, softer than the ray that they usually shed.

We all stood in a group, chattering about the bazaar, and making casual remarks upon the coming storm. Hugh said the shadows were quite grand, and Mr. Labatt chimed in—

'Ah, but did you ever watch a thunderstorm in the Lauterbrunnen Valley? That is a sight! I shall never forget——'

'There's the first flash of lightning!' Johnny cried, cutting a caper in honour of it. 'I say, let's all go to the front-door steps and watch it.'

His last words were drowned in a peal of rattling thunder, and yet, though the storm sounded so near—ah, me! how nearer, by so much, than I—than any of us thought!—the sky above our heads looked blue and bright.

They all, except Hugh and myself, complied with Johnny's adjuration and retired towards the porch and the steps. Mr. Entwistle drew me aside, and we still paced about the garden.

'Don't go in, Betty. It has not begun to rain yet. You were not at church this afternoon.'

'No.'

'Tired out with that stupid bazaar, I suppose?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' said I, not wishing to enter into further particulars, and I made as if to follow the others.

'There is no need to be in any hurry,' said he. 'Don't you see how happy they are? They don't want us, and we don't want them.'

I raised my eyes, and looked. Shall I ever forget the scene I saw? I think, never. Mr. Labatt and Alison were standing together on the higher step, and Johnny was sitting at their feet, on the lower one, with his elbows on his knees, gazing at the oncoming storm.

Alison, too, was looking intently at the storm. Mr. Labatt was looking at her, with a look that none could have mistaken in his eyes.

Alison's white hands were folded lightly before her, her fair face somewhat upraised, and her shining brown hair crowning her shapely head. She had thrown aside her bonnet, and her clear, keen, pellucid eyes gazed with a large comprehensive glance out and around upon 'the happy autumn fields' down the valley, across to the dim moors which closed in the southern horizon, and there was a deep, calm, subdued happiness in her very

look, in the light of her gray eyes, in the downward curve of her lips. She did not see us ; she was thinking of some one or of something either nearer or farther away than we were. Her face at that moment was in light. She looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her—or so it seemed to me.

‘Mr. Entwistle!’ said I, as we gradually approached this group, ‘don’t you think Alizon is beautiful?’

‘She is indeed!’ he replied. ‘And we have made up our quarrel at last.’

At this moment the whole atmosphere was darkened ; the cloud became blacker ; the strange, lurid light upon everything faded.

‘Let us go in,’ said I ; ‘the storm is really coming.’

‘Let us go in,’ I heard Alizon say also, as she turned ; but Mr. Labatt, who appeared to have forgotten that others were present, laid his hand upon her shoulder, saying—

‘Stop a moment, Alizon ! Did you see that ?—ah ! There’s——’

Again she had turned her face to the storm ; another blinding, lurid flash darted across the heavens ; for one moment I seemed to see those eyes of hers, in all their beauty and light, and then—— She suddenly flung up her arms, staggered—fell—without a word, and Mr. Labatt caught her ere she fell to the ground.

‘What——what is it?’ said Hugh, in a startled, bewildered whisper.

‘Her eyes—her eyes!’ I exclaimed, seizing his arm, and dragging him—as if he could help—with me, towards them.

I put them all aside ; Johnny, with his piteous ‘Alizon ! Alizon !’—Hectorina, with her white face and trembling hands—all but Mr. Labatt, who held my sister’s motionless form, and was gazing down with hungry, desperate eyes into her beautiful, deadly pale face. But was she dead ? She looked so ; I was frantic with apprehension. I could not speak—the eyes were

convulsively closed, as if nothing could open them. This I saw when I had loosened her hand from her forehead. It dropped limply by her side. In vain I called upon her name. She made no answer.

Then Hugh came up the steps.

'Is she dead?' I asked him, in a voice hardly audible from agony.

'I don't think so,' said he. 'Stay here, Betty, for a few minutes. I must prepare your mother for this.'

My mother! That was a thing I had not till now thought of; but I could think of nothing but Alizon for more than a moment. Mr. Labatt covered his face and gave a groan. Then I was aware that some one put even me aside, and when I looked up, I beheld my mother's face bending over us, and looking as I trust never to see it look again.

She did not kiss Alizon, nor weep nor cry. She drew a long breath, and after a momentary pause, she turned to Mr. Labatt, and said—

'You carry her into the house, please.'

We all fell aside, silently, as he complied; and they three went into the house alone.

Alizon did not die. She was reserved for another fate. It was many days before we knew that that long, happy look across the land she loved was the last she would ever take. After the long, terrible days of unconsciousness were over, she at last opened her eyes, and all around was dark. Day and night were henceforth to be alike to her. She, whose chief delight lay in sight—whose eyes missed no one thing of what was beautiful and great—must see no more. Operations were spoken of; they held out hopes at first that the sight of both eyes might be saved; then, 'we may succeed in preserving one;' and we clung feverishly to either hope—to any hope. But when the fiat did come, it was irrevocable. The lightning flash which she had

too bravely faced, had smitten her eyes, and caused *amaurosis*—paralysis of the retina. The two great oculists who, after every consideration, every care, had to sum up and tell us the truth, did it in three brief words—‘Blind for life!’

CHAPTER XXX

It was a sultry afternoon in September—the afternoon of the hottest day of the year. Our house was more decidedly a house of mourning than anything else, for it was only two days since the fiat had gone forth that Alizon must see no more.

I was sitting with her upstairs in our mother's sitting-room, and we were alone. The fever and the nervousness, results of the fearful shock which her whole system had received, had subsided—she was gradually recovering bodily health—all that remained was for us and her to resign ourselves to what remained of life for her.

'Alizon, the doctor said this morning that we might remove that bandage from over your eyes. Would you like to take it away?'

'No,' she replied, turning away her face. 'When this handkerchief, or whatever it is—when it covers my eyes I know that something prevents the light from coming to them; but if you take it off, I shall know that I am blind.'

Repenting that I had made such a *mal à propos* suggestion, I was silent.

'What time is it?' asked Alizon, wearily.

'Four o'clock, dear.'

'Betty,' said she, with suppressed pain in her voice, 'don't call me "dear." You never used to, and it sounds just as if you said, "Poor wretch!"'

There was silence again. I went on with my work,

and she sat perfectly still in her place. At last I ventured to look at her, forgetting that she could not see me if I stared at her for an hour. The white bandage that passed over her eyes hid them and the half of her brow, but below that I could see, as she half reclined, her head thrown a little back, and her long, white throat exposed to view. Her mouth, then, was the only feature from whose expression I could form any idea of her feelings; that mouth was sternly sad—neither querulous nor fretful, but sad with a sadness too deep and bitter for tears.

Nothing had astonished me so much as Alizon's patience and quietness in her trouble. To us, who knew her, it was a matter of wonder that there should not have been constant storms of sorrow and despair ever since she knew her fate. There had not been one; and I almost wished, in my uneasy surprise, that she might break down, for I distrusted this deadly silence, varied only by dry, hard scoffs at her own helpless and wretched condition. What she felt, what she endured, beneath that stoic calm of manner, who should say? To my certain knowledge, she had never wept since that dreadful day. It was as if she said to herself, 'The worst has happened to me, and I will not cringe.'

Since the day of the disaster she had never named Mr. Labatt, nor alluded to the fact that, just as she had been turning away from the storm, his hand had interfered, and turned her face towards it. For my part, though I had thought much on the matter, I dared not have alluded to it under any circumstances unless she had led to the subject. She presently rose and stood up turning uncertainly, this way and that.

'Where are you, Betty?'

'Here, Alizon. Let me help you,' said I, springing to her side.

'No. Go back to your place again, and tell me where you are.'

'I am in the window,' said I, resuming my place.

'And I am—on which side of the fireplace, far or near?'

'On the far side, Alizon. Follow my voice. Do you not hear where I am?'

'Oh, I hear, but seeing is believing, you know. It is lucky it was not you who had this accident—you would never have got on without eyes, poor little thing! No; I am glad it was not you.'

I murmured something in a choked voice, by way of answer, and she began to make her slow faltering way towards me, feeling first one thing and then another, and pausing painfully now and then—Alizon, who used to dart along with the rapid unfailing step of a mountain deer. I sat with my work sunk in my lap, watching her in a passion of grief that I dared not utter. If she had not mourned, I had; I had never ceased questioning myself, fate, circumstance, heaven, and earth, as to what she had done to deserve this stroke.

She at last stood beside me, and putting out her hand, it encountered the glass of the window.

'Ah! now I know where I am,' she said. 'I am looking towards Bolton, am I not?'

'Yes, Alizon.'

'The day is fine and hot. The water in the canal looks smooth and thick, and flows sluggishly along; a train is coming slowing up the line from the Hamerton station?'

'Yes, Alizon.'

'Is any one coming across the fields?'

'No. There is nothing in the fields except one cow in the nearer one.'

'Ah!' said she, with a disappointed look.

Just then a bell sounded through the house. Alizon started; turned first red, then white; every line of her face listened.

'Can it be anything about Martin?' I ejaculated, for every ring brought that question to my mind.

'Ah! perhaps it is,' said she, her face losing its look of interest.

A knock at the door. 'I went to it, and found Jane, the housemaid, standing outside.

'Missis was taking a little rest, Miss Betty, so I came to you. Mr. Labatt has called; and he would like to speak to you, to inquire about Miss Howarth.'

'I will be with him directly,' said I, returning to the room to put down my work.

'What did Jane say?' asked Alizon, in a restrained voice, and, on looking at her, I found her face was pale.

'Did she say something about Mr. Labatt?'

'He has called, Alizon, to inquire after you. I will not be many minutes away.' And I prepared to go.

'Stop, Betty? You are in such a hurry. I should like to see him.'

'See him!' I ejaculated, intelligently. In some indefinable manner, I connected Mr. Labatt with the cause of Alizon's misfortune, and would willingly have agreed never to see him again.

'Yes, see him!' she repeated. 'I shall have to see him before he leaves—to say good-bye to him, and why not now? Then it will be over. Take this bandage off my eyes, and, remember, Betty, you are not to leave the room while he is here. There is nothing like having a third person present to make people restrain themselves. Not that he is a man to give way to his feelings, but I am sure he will be sorry to see me in this way.'

'Very well, Alizon, I will stay, but I am quite sure that if Mr. Labatt chooses to say anything to you, he will not be prevented by my presence from saying it.'

'Very well. Am I tidy, Betty? Do I look a scarecrow or dishevelled?'

'You are quite neat, Alizon,' said I, scarcely able to command my voice, so piteous was it to see her thus helpless. 'You look as you always did—only the bandage.'

'Ah, yes! Unfasten it. Take it off.'

I complied.

'How your fingers tremble!' said she, as if surprised. 'Pray do not be nervous. There is not the least need for it. I am not nervous. Now tell me if I look very vacant—very "wanting,"' she added, in an indescribable tone, as she turned and faced the light.

Oh, what should I say? Vacant her face could never be; but when I beheld those limpid eyes, I knew—I should have known had I been a casual stranger and passed her in the street—that they were sightless.

'You do not speak,' said she.

'You could not look vacant, Alizon. You look very nice—beautiful,' said I, repressing a sob.

'Beautiful! My dear Betty, it is of no use asking you anything. Go down, and tell Mr. Labatt I should like to see him if he will come upstairs.'

Slowly and reluctantly I went downstairs to the drawing-room. My hand lingered on the door handle, ere I turned it and went in. Mr. Labatt was standing in the window, looking out of it. When he heard me enter he turned with an eager look. How changed was his face! He looked to me both old and haggard, and my suspicions, which had been daily growing deeper, concerning him and Alizon, became in that moment almost a certainty. Still, I could not feel cordial towards him. I could not drive from my mind the idea that if he had not been at our house that Sunday afternoon—if he had not put his hand upon Alizon's shoulder—if he had not turned her face towards the clouds—but I dared not think it all out.

He came to me and took my hand.

'Your maid said she was better,' he said, 'but I felt I must see you at least, and hear some more particulars. How is she, really?'

'I think she is a little better. I—but she told me to ask you to come upstairs—she would like to see you.'

'She will really see me—she will speak to me?' he exclaimed. 'I can hardly believe it. She must look

upon me as in some way connected with this horrible disaster. I had not hoped to see her.'

'She says she would like to see you,' I repeated, mechanically, and led the way back again to the room in which I had left Alizon.

When we entered she was seated in my place by the window, but on hearing us she rose, and over her face and neck and forehead ran a deep, painful blush—the blush of one in doubt and perplexity.

'Mr. Labatt is here, Alizon!' said I, pitying him from my heart as I saw his eyes fasten in an instant upon hers, and the look of utter misery that overspread his face. He knew now that what he had tried to disbelieve was all true.

'I hardly hoped to see you, Alizon,' he began, but at the sound of his voice her face suddenly changed. Now I knew the secret of her Spartan calmness, and her apparent indifference. She too had never realised until this moment what had happened; Reginald Labatt's voice touched the string to which vibrated hitherto untouched depths of emotion—grief, yearning, regret—stronger than anything she had yet felt.

She had said she did not want to have any 'scene,' any breakdown. She had miscalculated her own power of endurance. As Mr. Labatt's voice ceased, with a break in the last words, the first tears she had shed fell from her eyes; with a deep sob she sat down again.

And for Mr. Labatt, all the gentleness, all the calm manner and soothing words which this poor philosopher had been preparing for the interview—for he bore in mind how the doctors said she must not be disturbed or agitated—all this proved vain, took unto itself wings and fled away. In a moment he was at her side; in a moment he had clasped the hand that hung by her side, and was kissing it—tremulously, reverently—yet passionately too. Mr. Labatt mourned not merely the blighted life of a young girl, but the woe of the woman he loved.

'Oh, Alizon!' he murmured, at last. 'I have had some share in this calamity. I—how can you bear to see me here?'

'You—no, that is nonsense,' said she, recovering herself somewhat. 'Don't let us talk about that, but of something else. I am sorry now, of course, but in time I shall get used to it; already I say *Kismet!* It was to be—why be troubled about it?'

'Why—because I——'

'Hush, Mr. Labatt. You are going to say what is not wise,' said she steadily, and, as I thought, almost coldly, but I knew it was because she had to control her voice.

'I shall do very well,' she went on. 'I have Betty here, who is very good and kind. She always was my dearest little sister, because she and I are so unlike. She will not let me feel worse off than is necessary—will you, Betty?'

'N—never, Alizon. You shall never feel anything wrong that I can do for you.'

But Mr. Labatt looked at her with deep brooding eyes.

'You must go on with your book,' she continued to him. 'It will be a grand book. I shall often think of you, and picture you writing, or with some one else writing for you—— You and Miss Labatt—you in your study, and she in her long drawing-room, in the summer evenings.'

She had been desperately trying to keep the conversation from turning to one particular subject, but the pause which she was obliged to make here gave him an opportunity.

'Alizon,' and his voice dominated hers, as a man's voice will dominate a woman's resistance, 'you must listen to me—I want to speak to you,' and he looked towards me. I made a movement to leave the room.

'Betty,' said she, decisively. 'I did not ask you to go. Please stay where you are. If you will say it,' she added, turning to him, 'you will; I am waiting.'

I read her determination in her voice and her face if he did not.

‘For nearly three years you have lived under my roof,’ said he; ‘and for two years, Alizon, I have loved you as I never thought to love woman. Now, in your sorrow and your calamity, I love you ten times more, and I ask you if you cannot love me and be my wife. Let me be to you the sight you have lost, and something more as well.’

I watched her, and him too, breathlessly. To me it seemed that so true and so beautiful a love carried in itself the assurance of acceptance and fulfilment.

Mr. Labatt, the man of science, the distant philosopher, the fine gentleman who had awed me without winning my regard, had my best wishes now. He was no common man, I knew—neither was Alizon like other girls. Blind though she might be, she would make him a noble wife, and I knew that she loved him.

She had covered her brow with her hand, and it was after a pause that she said in a low, distinct, and inflexibly determined voice—

‘I am proud to have been loved by you; but there it ends. I cannot be your wife.’

‘But, Alizon, think! Consider me——’

She smiled. There was no relenting at all in her face. To me it was something terrible to see his agonised attentiveness. I realised what a cast he had made, what depended on the throw—and her imperturbable calm.

‘No,’ said she, unwaveringly. ‘I cannot talk about it. If you care for me as you say you do, do not make me discuss this matter. I say “No”—once and for all; it cannot and shall not be.’

‘This is certain?’ he asked, in a voice which seemed to die away from very anguish.

‘Certain as truth itself. Now—do not let us prolong this—scene. I cannot bear it. Say good-bye to me.’

'You credit me with being able to do something more than human,' said he, with flashing eyes, and in a strangely moved voice. 'Yet, to please you, I must try. Alizon—my queen and my love—my only love that I shall ever have—I bid you good-bye.'

They were both standing up, and he took her hand; but before I, or she, or I think he, knew what he intended to do, he had clasped her in his arms, strained her to his very heart, and kissed her with a despairing kiss. It was but for a moment.

'Take her!' said he to me, turning a pallid face towards me. 'Take her! I think she has fainted, or something.'

He put her into my arms and left the room.

Alizon had not fainted; she was not made of the stuff that faints, but more of that

'Men use to make storm staysails of.'

She had closed her eyes in the excess of her anguish, and her face was white and looked unconscious, but she presently recovered, and said, in a weak voice—

'That is over! I feared it must come.'

I dared not speak to her, and was glad to comply with her request that I would send mother to her, which I presently did. What passed between them I know not. Their characters were at bottom the same. Mother seemed to have found something she approved of in Alizon's conduct. We did not exchange a word upon the subject.

CHAPTER XXXI

AT tea-time our melancholy little party consisted of myself, Bobby, Fanny, and Clara. Mother was upstairs with Alizon.

‘Where is Johnny?’ I asked, looking round, and missing his familiar features. Nobody could tell me anything about him, so, concluding that he had gone to see some friend (our boys had many friends—at fourteen the ‘swopping’ of birds’ eggs or foreign stamps constitutes friendship), we proceeded with the meal.

I was too much occupied during tea-time in thinking of what had passed between Alizon and Mr. Labatt to think even of Martin, of whom nothing had yet been heard, except that his father said he was not at home, but that he had no fear of his coming to any harm; and he requested mother not to trouble her head about him, apologising for his rudeness and ingratitude, and promising that she should be informed concerning him so soon as there should be any information to give on the subject.

The children had at last given over wondering where Martin was, and were satisfied with the oft-repeated information that he had gone away and we did not know when he would come back.

When tea was over, Fanny and Clara, oppressed by the silence and dulness of the rest, retired to the school-room to learn their lessons and play with their dolls, one of which, since Alizon’s misfortune, had been made blind, by having both its glass eyes rammed into its

head with a bodkin. They rattled in the empty cranium with a melancholy sound, and the children wondered they had never thought of blinding a doll or two before; it made them so much more interesting.

Bobby had gone out, armed with a small box of precious birds' eggs, which were first to strike envy and despair into the soul of one Crossley, who did not possess any like them, and then were to raise him to the seventh heaven by reason of becoming his own.

Thus I was left to my own devices, which prompted me to wander up and down the house, from attic to basement, vainly trying to quiet my fears, or rest my mind by so doing. What a change had come over our life! And what was Alizon—what was her lover feeling now? How, when that love was offered her, could she doom herself to the life she must lead without it? It was a great deep mystery to me, and one before which I felt myself very small and powerless.

For me, I would devote myself to Alizon and mother for the rest of my life. I made firm resolutions to that effect, which were kept as such resolutions generally are.

At this juncture I passed the door of what was known as the 'loft,'—a large attic, playroom, and lumber receptacle, sacred to the cast-off possessions of the whole family. It seemed to me, as I passed, that I heard from within a sound like a sob. I listened, and this was followed by that unromantic noise—a snuffle. Wondering what it would portend, I went into the room, and looking round, perceived, seated with his back to me upon a small tin trunk, a well-known figure, arrayed in a familiar gray jacket. That brown, wavy hair I knew too.

'Why, Johnny!' I said, softly, going towards him on tiptoe, and looking over his stooping shoulder. He was crying, or had been—quite a little pool of tears wet the floor at his feet. His elbows rested upon his knees, and his hands supported his head. He looked up when I laid my hand on his shoulder.

'Betty,' said he, mournfully, 'it's no use. I've been thinking of Alizon all day, and I had to cry at last. So I came up here, and you mustn't tell Bob; he doesn't care about it as much as I do.'

'Poor Johnny!' said I, rapid tears rising to my own eyes too. 'It is very sad. We are all very sad, but how long have you been here, Johnny?'

'Ever since I came in from school. But I've thought about it all day, you know. I had to try so hard not to begin crying in class. The other fellows would have laughed so. I couldn't do anything—I went down, and down, and now I've got a beastly imposition to do. But how could I help? I was thinking of Alizon.' And he turned a pair of heavy, wet eyes upon me.

'Oh, Johnny! You have had no tea.'

'No, nor dinner either. I wasn't at all hungry.' And he looked at me, with a sort of melancholy pride and satisfaction in his own abnormal state.

'You may well look ill! Poor boy! Must I tell you what Alizon would say if she knew?'

He nodded.

'She would say, "Go downstairs with Betty directly, and get something to eat, and don't fret any longer."'

'Do you think she would?'

'Positive. So come, Johnny, there's my boy. Come and have some tea, and afterwards you must come with me and see Alizon. She would like to see you. You and she were always such friends.'

He let me persuade him; rose, followed me, and we left the room. I prepared him some tea, and saw him eat and drink with much satisfaction. Every now and then he gave utterance to a sort of gasp—a compromise between a cough, a sneeze, and a sob. When he had finished his meal, we went into the hall, and I proposed to read aloud to him *Peter Simple*.

He accepted my offer, and we repaired to a venerable old leather-covered sofa, which stood temptingly near the open door.

'I didn't feel so bad, Betty, before we knew that she could really not see again. I was sure she would come all right, and I felt quite cheerful, but the day before yesterday, you know, when that doctor with the gray hair came out of her room——'

'Well, Johnny?'

'I stopped him and said, "How soon will Alizon be able to see again?" He looked at me, and then he said, "My dear boy, your sister will never see again in this world." Oh, how I hated him!'

'He could not help it, Johnny.'

'No, I suppose not. Betty—I would so like to see Alizon.'

'My darling boy! You shall see her this very night. If I had only known of this! Poor Alizon would like to see you.'

'Her eyes were always so quick too, not a bit like girls' eyes; she could tell in a minute if the wickets were cock-eyed, and she could see such a long way—but she n—n—never will again!'

Overpowered by the idea, Johnny buried his face upon my shoulder and gave way to his grief, till I bethought myself to say—

'Well, Johnny, you can do no end of things to make it easier to her, you know.'

'Betty,' said he, looking at me solemnly, 'do you think she will ever go about with a little dog? Blind men who beg do, you know. If I thought she would like it, I'd see about a dog directly. I know a fellow who——'

'I don't think our Alizon will ever be reduced to that, Johnny. Dry your eyes and cheer up.'

He searched his pocket till he found a little black rag looking something like a superannuated duster, which he proceeded to apply to his eyes, but I cried—

'Oh, Johnny, stop! Here's a nice handkerchief; scented. What have you been doing to yours?'

'Nothing, but it had got underneath all the things in my pocket, so I forgot it.'

‘Dear Johnny, suppose you turn out your pockets and let us clear away all the rubbish.’

He was in a very meek and gentle mood or he would never have consented to such an outrage upon his property. He permitted me to turn out his pockets, and spread their contents upon the little round table before us. A detailed catalogue of them would take up too much space. Amongst other things, however, were three knives—two with mutilated blades, one in a state of tolerable preservation. Then I came upon something hard and greasy.

‘What is this,’ I asked.

‘A little oilstone,’ said he. ‘Jack Schofield gave it me—at least I swopped him some stamps for it—an Argentine Republic and a Pony Express—and a lump of cobbler’s wax.’

‘How can you carry an oilstone in your pocket, child? And here is a lump of cobbler’s wax, I declare! How horrible it smells. Let me throw it away.’

‘No, no! Let it alone. Ah! That’s a nice little file, isn’t it? I wouldn’t part with that for something, I can tell you.’

‘What are these—fossils or petrifications?’ I asked, curiously turning over two blackish lumps of a hard substance.

A faint blush tinged his cheek, as he replied, ‘That one is a lump of sugar, and the other a bit of bread crust. Don’t shy it away. I shall have had it fifteen months next week. Jack Schofield has one that he has had three years.’

A bullet-mould, a corkscrew, a pair of tweezers, a small quantity of dog-soap, several odd bits of cobbler’s wax—which would appear to be Johnny’s particular vanity, and which adhered like limpets to whatever they touched—a number of fishhooks, some coloured bait, and a dozen or so of marbles, with string *ad lib.*,—these were far from completing the list, though they formed the chief portion of it. I spread them out upon the table,

and was musing as to which would be the least objectionable to return to his pockets, when I felt his head weigh more heavily upon my shoulder. Looking at him, I found that the heavy lids had closed over the gray eyes. Johnny was fast asleep, and at that moment looked as beautiful and as innocent as a young boy-angel.

I leaned him comfortably back in the corner of the sofa, still keeping my arm under his head, and then I looked about to find a book, for we generally had a small library of poetry and railway novels dispersed about 'the sofa.' The only volume I could reach was a brown one, and when I found it to be *Dramatic Lyrics*, by Robert Browning, I was quite contented.

I turned over the leaves. 'Confession' met my eye, and I read a little of it, but it was too heartrending, and I turned over to find something else. Raising my eyes, they were arrested and held fast by the 'song without words' which spread before them. There was the blue haze never seen but in September. The fields sloped green down to the canal-side. Blue moors rose in the distance. I saw Fosshouse amongst its woods; and silence was over all.

Then the silence was broken by the sound of a bargeman's voice as he swore at his horse—or his wife. I began to think of Mr. Labatt's ideas on that subject.

'Emancipate the women; don't brutalise the men by punishing them with the cat——' At this point in my reverie, the haze seemed to grow thicker upon all things; my fingers loosed their hold upon my book; my cheek reposed itself upon Johnny's wavy hair; I forgot alike joy and sorrow, memory and anticipation, in sleep.

My slumber, however, could not have been very deep, for I awoke suddenly, feeling conscious of some fresh presence—some new element which had entered the scene. I felt sleepy and bewildered, but I instinctively lifted my head cautiously, so as not to disturb Johnny, who slumbered on, drawing long, regular breaths, as one

thoroughly wearied. It would take more than a little to disturb him.

Thus I looked round, expecting to see Fanny or Clara, though even in my semi-somnolent state I thought they made wonderfully little noise. Upon neither of them, however, did my eyes rest, but upon Hugh Entwistle, who stood just within the door, regarding us, or rather me, with an expression which made my heart beat fast. Instead of speaking, I remained foolishly gazing at him, my face aflame.

'May I come in?' he asked, softly.

'Oh yes, pray do.'

'I will tell you what I saw when I came up to the door,' he added, as he entered and seated himself on the couch beside me. 'I came up to inquire after your sister, and my hand was on the bell when I saw you. How glad I am that I did not ring!'

'I am very glad I awoke. But I am very tired.'

'Yes, I hear in your voice that you are.'

'Speak softly! I don't want to have him awakened,' said I, stroking Johnny's hair back from his warm, white forehead.

'It was a lovely little picture,' he said, speaking scarcely above a whisper, and looking rather exultant. 'You and Johnny appeared at peace with all the world.'

'When is a person to be at peace with all the world, unless when asleep?' I asked, smiling rather nervously. 'Mr. Entwistle, if you would like to see mother, you have only to ring the bell. Some one will answer it.'

'Thanks, very much, but no doubt Mrs. Howarth is with your sister. I would not disturb her for the world, and—it is very pleasant here. You cannot flit away from me, as I notice you generally do, and I am not such an idiot as to fly in the face of Providence on such an occasion.'

Not wishing to encourage such depravity I remained silent.

'Tell me about this,' pursued he. 'What is the

reason that you and Johnny, fell asleep on the couch? Why will you not have that sturdy brother of yours disturbed? Why are you tiring your arm with his heavy head in that self-sacrificing way?

I explained, concluding with the information that we had turned out Johnny's pockets.

'Yes,' I added. 'All those things were in them. Did your pockets ever hold such a collection?'

'Never having had a sister to turn them out, I can hardly say.'

'And he went to sleep in the midst of it, and then I went to sleep.'

He laughed. 'Poor child! You have looked for the last week as if all the cares of the nation lay upon your shoulders.'

'I would not care what became of the nation if only Alizon could see again.'

'How is she?'

'Ill!' I replied laconically, for I knew that her soul was sick, at least.

'I feel for her deeply; but—— Johnny's head is much too heavy for your arm. I will take your place.'

'Can you do it without awaking him?'

'Yes, I can—if you will stay here and talk to me.'

'Oh yes.'

'Very well. Now, if I put my arm thus, under this curly head, you can withdraw yours,' rising and bending over me.

I withdrew my arm, moved away, and Hugh took my place.

'There!' said he, looking up at me with a significant smile. 'If you like to run away, I cannot prevent it.'

I stood silent, afraid to go and, afraid to stay, wishing that I could look and feel indifferent, knowing, alas! that I was blushing uncomfortably—wishing that he were less perfectly self-possessed and composed—less obviously aware of my embarrassment and confusion.

'Well, Betty, are you going? That undecided

attitude is very trying. "Use no ceremony, I beg," as my mother says.'

I looked wistfully around. The big oaken chairs on either side the door were fixtures. There was no place but the sofa to sit upon, and my answer to Hugh's exordium was—

'I wonder where Clara and Fanny are!'

'Suppose you go and sit with them instead of with me.'

Feeling assured that if I did so I should be reminded of the fact on some future occasion, and in a disconcerting manner, I seated myself—beside him—upon the couch.

No sooner had I done so than I wished I had not done it; then wondered angrily why I was always blushing at nothing; then began to turn over the pages of *Dramatic Lyrics* in search of consolation. What should I talk about? I wondered, as I read a line here and there, without knowing what the words were, until Hugh inquired, calmly—

'What are you reading, Betty?' and as calmly deprived me of my book.

'Nothing. What shall we talk about?' I said, desperately.

He had been glancing at the book. His eye suddenly caught some passage, and flashed quickly towards me.

'I think we'll talk about this, Betty,' said he, gravely, as he put the book on the table and pointed to a verse. 'See!'

Following his guiding finger with my eyes, I read—

'You might have turned and tried a man,
Set him a space to weary and wear,
And prove which suited best your plan;
His best of hope, or his worst despair.'

'But you spared me this, like the heart that you arc,
And filled my empty heart at a word.'

There his finger stopped, fortunately, for my heart was throbbing so that I could not read another word. Involuntarily I looked up, and found the eyes I most of any loved and feared regarding me steadfastly.

'Will you do that for me?' he asked. 'Will you "fill my empty heart at a word," my dearest?'

'I—oh, what word?'

'Say "yes," to the question I ask you,' said he. 'I love you, Betty—do you love me?'

He spoke with an emphasis that thrilled me, and looked unwaveringly at me for my answer; his hand resting upon the oaken table-top aforesaid. Putting both my hands upon his, in the insane idea that I could hold it down, I said, hurriedly—

'I love you better than any one, but—but—I am not good enough. I should drive you wild. I am such a stupid blundering little donkey.'

'Try your worst to drive me wild—I am wild already, with love to you,' said he, with a triumphant laugh; while the right hand that I tried to hold down put aside my hands, and drew me to him.

'Say once more, "I love you, Hugh."'

'I do love—oh, Hugh!'

Frightened though I was, that first long kiss was very sweet.

'I do love—oh, Betty!' said he, laughing. 'In fact, when I found that you would stay with me, in spite of all I could say or do to get rid of you——'

'That is to say, because I was humane enough to remain with you under trying circumstances,' I began—but at that moment Bobby appeared at the front door, and entered with a loud noise, announcing that Saxon was coming after him. Johnny awoke, stared foolishly about him, and asked what it meant. Hugh began to tell him a long romance of how he had found me fainting under his weight, when Bobby interpolated—

'Yes, and it has given her a face as red—as red as a strip of scarlet flannel'—Bobby's similes were always

remarkably happy—‘I say, Saxon, look at Betty’s face.’

‘Yes, I see,’ said Saxon, drily, looking with a significant smile from Hugh to me.

‘I will go and tell mother that you are here,’ I observed, rising. Hugh and Saxon received the information with rather derisive laughs, and Bobby, planting himself in my place, shouted after me—

‘Well, I say, Betty, you might have given him a little more room at any rate. Why didn’t you shove her away, Mr. Entwistle?’

Hugh began an elaborate explanation of the reasons for not doing so, and I beat a judicious retreat.

CHAPTER XXXII

‘THE Labatts have gone home,’ said Sydney Bamford, about three days later, to Alizon and me. I saw she had come upon a twofold errand—to congratulate me, and to break this news to Alizon, and to see how she was.

There was a pause after this remark. Sydney looked—for the first and only time in my experience—nervous, and glanced at Alizon. Of course she knew nothing of the scene which had taken place at our house—unless Mr. Labatt had told her something about it; I wondered if he had; people had a way of confiding in Sydney’s large heart and her generous sympathy.

I felt nervous, and for once Miss Bamford’s and my garrulous tongues were completely tied.

‘Gone, have they?’ said Alizon, quietly; ‘did they—did Mr. Labatt leave any message for me?’

‘Yes; he told me to say that of course he did not attempt to see you again now, but that sometime in the future he trusted to meet you, and that you would not refuse him your friendship then.’

‘He may be sure I shall not,’ said Alizon in a low voice; and she remained, with her hands folded in her lap and her blind eyes downcast—face pale, and looking, to my anguished eyes, thin, haggard, and worn. The sight was evidently a painful one to Sydney Bamford; to change the subject she turned to me, and asked—

‘Any news of Martin yet?’

‘No real news, but I had such a horrid dream about

him last night,' said I, shuddering. 'And I should not wonder if it came true. Dreams do come true, sometimes. Once we had a nurse who lost her thimble, and she had a dream that she found it in my Sunday-frock pocket; so she went and looked, and there it was.'

'Divine unto us this dream,' said Sydney.

'Oh, it was that he had enlisted and gone to India, and a tiger got him,' said I.

'Highly probable,' said Sydney, smiling derisively.

'Oh, I wish I knew where he was!' said I. 'I am so miserable when I think about him. I know that people do disappear sometimes in that way and are never heard of again. Suppose he has been murdered!'

They both laughed in what seemed to me a cruelly indifferent manner, and Sydney, saying she had no time to talk about Martin, went away.

About a week later than this, took place a momentous event in my career—or what I considered a momentous event. I can smile at it now, but it cost my unreasonable soul much pain and anguish at the time, and taught me a lesson as to the depths of meanness to which I was capable of descending. It happened thus.

Alizon, Hugh, and I were one evening in the drawing-room, talking softly together, and I leaning out of the window that looked upon the lane.

'There's the postman coming, child!' observed Hugh.

'Oh, let me go and find what he's got!' I exclaimed, jumping up and flying off to the front door, where I met him, and received from his hand a single letter, directed to me too. The postmark was London, E., and the handwriting was as the handwriting of Martin Lancaster. With my heart beating fast, I carried it into the drawing-room, seated myself in the other window, and leaving Hugh and Alizon to continue what appeared to be a very interesting conversation, opened the letter.

'DEAR BETTY—I am not drowned; I have not enlisted; I have not turned telegraph clerk, nor yet accountant. You have not heard of me, but I have heard of you, and know that what I always prophesied has come true. Well—I congratulate you; I wish you happiness and prosperity. More I cannot say on that subject.

'I am writing to you because you, as you know, are the cause of my having left Hamerton; therefore to you, if to any one, is due the explanation of what I have done, and what I am about to do.

'Just now I am at my home—at least at my father's house. I only came yesterday. Where I have been in the interim matters not. I have breathed more freely ever since I lost the sound of buzzing looms and roaring spindles—since I lost the sight of factories and tall chimneys—and of the owners of the same—not to enter into particulars.

'What am I going to do with myself? I am going to remain here until the Long Vacation is over, and then I am going to—Cambridge; for I have accepted Miss Labatt's proposal. You left me nothing else, Betty. I don't pretend to say that I like the prospect, or that I am altogether fitted for it—but I have no alternative. I should think you, at least, would prefer me to stay from Hamerton—in the body, let my spirit be where it will.

'My heart's heavy—it must be heavy. You—under the present circumstances—you may forget: I never can, and never shall.

'Farewell, Betty—fare you well. Think sometimes of
MARTIN LANCASTER.'

By the time I had finished this heartrending mixture of vanity, philosophy, and egotism, with its faint gleams of a better feeling which, like buttercups and daisies, 'spring up here and there,' I was dissolved in tears. Poor Martin! My old friend and playfellow—

to whom I had spoken so hardly and harshly! It was cruel.

Alizon heard the sound of my sorrow, and interrupting her conversation with Hugh, inquired with solicitude what was the matter.

'It's a letter from Martin!' I faltered, drying my eyes.

'Oh, from Martin, is it?' said Hugh, in a peculiar voice.

'What does he say?' asked Alizon, with what I thought a very careless manner.

'Something affecting, I should suppose,' surmised my lover, looking at me fixedly and inquiringly.

'A beautiful letter!' I sighed. 'Poor Martin! He always was so generous and forgiving!'

'Very!' said Hugh, drily. 'I always noticed it.'

'Well, suppose you read the effusion,' suggested Alizon, unfeelingly.

Hugh did not back up this proposal, and I replied—

'I really don't think I could read it myself, but if you will——' and I held it with a mournful smile towards Hugh.

'Humph!' said he, doubtfully, as he frowned and pulled his moustache.

'Please do!' I implored, and he went so far as to take it gingerly in his hand, and peruse it from beginning to end. As he did so, an expression of relief appeared upon his face—a smile developed itself upon his lips—his lowered eyebrows were lifted—he turned to Alizon, saying—

'Now, Alizon, listen to this! I'm afraid it will encourage your cynicism, but it is too good to be lost.'

Wherewith he read the letter aloud—slowly, gravely, and impressively. I gradually approached nearer, listening with many shakes of the hand, and much circumstance of 'Ahs!' and 'Ohs!' and as Hugh's deep voice proclaimed the sentiments of the writer with a dignity which their author could never have acquired, my tears flowed afresh.

I could not, however, help seeing the smile which dawned gradually upon Alizon's face—a scoffing look which formed rather a wet blanket to my maudlin sentimentality. Hugh finished the letter, turned it over with a disdainful little gesture, looked at me, and smiled provokingly.

‘Martin, his mark in every line,’ he observed.

‘Yes, indeed!’ assented Alizon, with a jeering little laugh.

‘Do you not pity him—poor fellow?’ I asked, my tears ceasing, as I gazed rather indignantly from one to the other.

‘I don’t pity him one bit,’ said Alizon.

‘I don’t see what he wants with pity,’ chimed in Hugh. ‘Conceit and egotism do not usually evoke pity.’

‘I am sure he wrote all that from the most solemn conviction,’ said I, very impressively. ‘I think it is a beautiful letter. I shall keep it.’

‘Will you?’ he asked, in some surprise, and Alizon laughed again.

‘Do you object?’ I asked, doubtfully.

‘Not in the least, dear, if you do not.’

‘What he says about remembering’—I began.

‘And his generous allusions to myself, and his congratulations. But, as you remarked, he always was so generous and forgiving.’

‘Give it to me! Let me burn it this very minute,’ said I quickly.

‘Learn it by heart first,’ said he, handing it to me, with a half smile.

‘I wish I could tell whether you mean what you say!’ I complained, trying in vain to read his wishes in his eyes.

‘I wish exactly what you wish.’

‘I shall go and show it to mother first,’ said I, slowly, and slowly too going out of the room, with an undercurrent of uneasy pain in my heart, to which,

though I had felt it more than once, I had not yet learnt to give a name.

On the contrary, whenever this vague feeling assailed me, I tried to drive it away by telling myself that one of the most delightful things about my engagement was the perfect sympathy and delight which Hugh and Alizon seemed to feel in each other's society. This was so nice, I kept persistently telling myself, I had no scruple in having them together, for there was not a thing I did for Alizon which Hugh could not do much better. He could read to her, talk to her, argue with her, or be silent, with a tact which always led him to do the right thing, and which I sighed for in vain. She had forgiven long ago any slight which she might once have thought she received from him, and her forgiveness was like everything else about her—out-and-out—entire; without a shred of malice or suspicion left hanging like a neglected cobweb in any corner of her heart. I was glad of this—of course.

I took my letter to mother, who read it, but did not smile.

'Martin has written as generously as he knew how, said she. 'But he must be a poor-spirited fellow to accept Miss Labatt's bounty. A young man of twenty ought not to be living on charity.'

'No —— And now I may as well burn it,' said I, as if I considered that a matter of course.

'Yes, I should do so if Hugh has seen it. There is certainly no need to keep it.'

Without a word I tore the letter across and dropped it into the fire, thinking—

'Poor Martin! We were very happy once, when we used to write *Medora* by the light of a dip candle in the schoolroom, and read Tennyson and Shakespeare and Shelley.'

I sat still upon the hearthrug, staring into the fire, and the shadows of evening closed into the room. My mother had laid aside her book, and the click of her

needles told me she was knitting. By and by my reflections upon the past and gone friendship of Martin and myself came to an end. I fell to wondering what Hugh and Alizon were talking about now.

‘They are not dull, I am sure,’ I thought. ‘I don’t believe they know I am not there. Whenever I find them alone, they are always laughing and talking.’ This was untrue. I could have counted the number of times that Alizon had laughed since she lost her sight. ‘Well, no wonder they like to be together. He is clever, and she is clever; they must be interested in each other. They never agree; but then their differences are pleasant. Alizon can say clever things, and Hugh likes to hear them. She gives him something to think about. Now I—can only agree with everything he says, which must be very tame and uninteresting. I wonder if I am doing quite right to agree in all he says and does so very much—never to oppose him at all. It may be a very bad beginning——’ I shook my head sapiently.—‘Surely people of eighteen—if they are old enough to be engaged—are old enough to have opinions of their own. I wish I had not burnt that letter of Martin’s. I have forgotten some of the things he said—it would have done no harm to keep it, and Hugh said I might if I liked—might—why, of course I might. What could he have possibly said against it? Upon my word, I am sure it is not right to be so very submissive. Roses without thorns——’

‘Hugh has left early this evening,’ observed mother. ‘Had he some engagement?’

This remark and question fell with startling effect upon my mind. It showed me what I had been thinking; it translated all my heart-beatings, fears, discomforts, and uneasiness into a word that was short, easy, and expressive enough—‘jealous.’

‘He has not gone,’ said I, with what was meant for a careless laugh. ‘I left him talking to Alizon in the drawing-room.’

'You should not have stayed away so long, Betty. It looks ungracious.'

'Oh, he won't mind,' said I; but I left my mother, and went to seek them. The fire in the drawing-room had burned low—no candles had been lighted, but I distinguished the figure of Hugh, alone, in the window. He was leaning back in an easy chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and seemed contented enough. I was piqued—senselessly and aimlessly, but I was in the happy humour which can turn any action into a cause of offence—any action, or any absence of action either. My absence, I reasoned, did not appear to have caused him any regret. No doubt he was thinking about—business; yes, business, of course—about the state of the market, and the fall in prices which to-day's evening edition of the *Manchester Examiner and Times* showed to have taken place.

'Where is Alizon?' I asked, as if much surprised.

'She went away ages ago. I thought you must be with her.'

'No, I have not seen her.'

'Then where have you been?' he asked, smiling, putting his arm round my waist, and drawing me to the window. I felt angry and mortified, I hardly knew why, and instead of replying I looked across the shadowy landscape, at Fosshouse, in the distance.

'Not crying any more over Martin's letter, eh?' he added, laughing, even while he clasped me somewhat closer, as if to say, 'This is a joke, of course. What have we to do with Martin and his vagaries?'

'I have not been laughing over it, at any rate.'

'No; I didn't suspect you of anything so unkind. Then where have you been? May I not know why I have been left alone so long?'

'I have been upstairs with mother.'

'Oh! If I had known she wanted you, I would not have asked.'

This was aggravating, but I could not let him run

needles told me she was knitting. By and by my reflections upon the past and gone friendship of Martin and myself came to an end. I fell to wondering what Hugh and Alizon were talking about now.

‘They are not dull, I am sure,’ I thought. ‘I don’t believe they know I am not there. Whenever I find them alone, they are always laughing and talking.’ This was untrue. I could have counted the number of times that Alizon had laughed since she lost her sight. ‘Well, no wonder they like to be together. He is clever, and she is clever; they must be interested in each other. They never agree; but then their differences are pleasant. Alizon can say clever things, and Hugh likes to hear them. She gives him something to think about. Now I—can only agree with everything he says, which must be very tame and uninteresting. I wonder if I am doing quite right to agree in all he says and does so very much—never to oppose him at all. It may be a very bad beginning——’ I shook my head sapiently.—‘Surely people of eighteen—if they are old enough to be engaged—are old enough to have opinions of their own. I wish I had not burnt that letter of Martin’s. I have forgotten some of the things he said—it would have done no harm to keep it, and Hugh said I might if I liked—might—why, of course I might. What could he have possibly said against it? Upon my word, I am sure it is not right to be so very submissive. Roses without thorns——’

‘Hugh has left early this evening,’ observed mother. ‘Had he some engagement?’

This remark and question fell with startling effect upon my mind. It showed me what I had been thinking; it translated all my heart-beatings, fears, discomforts, and uneasiness into a word that was short, easy, and expressive enough—‘jealous.’

‘He has not gone,’ said I, with what was meant for a careless laugh. ‘I left him talking to Alizon in the drawing-room.’

'You should not have stayed away so long, Betty. It looks ungracious.'

'Oh, he won't mind,' said I; but I left my mother, and went to seek them. The fire in the drawing-room had burned low—no candles had been lighted, but I distinguished the figure of Hugh, alone, in the window. He was leaning back in an easy chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and seemed contented enough. I was piqued—senselessly and aimlessly, but I was in the happy humour which can turn any action into a cause of offence—any action, or any absence of action either. My absence, I reasoned, did not appear to have caused him any regret. No doubt he was thinking about—business; yes, business, of course—about the state of the market, and the fall in prices which to-day's evening edition of the *Manchester Examiner and Times* showed to have taken place.

'Where is Alizon?' I asked, as if much surprised.

'She went away ages ago. I thought you must be with her.'

'No, I have not seen her.'

'Then where have you been?' he asked, smiling, putting his arm round my waist, and drawing me to the window. I felt angry and mortified, I hardly knew why, and instead of replying I looked across the shadowy landscape, at Fosshouse, in the distance.

'Not crying any more over Martin's letter, eh?' he added, laughing, even while he clasped me somewhat closer, as if to say, 'This is a joke, of course. What have we to do with Martin and his vagaries?'

'I have not been laughing over it, at any rate.'

'No; I didn't suspect you of anything so unkind. Then where have you been? May I not know why I have been left alone so long?'

'I have been upstairs with mother.'

'Oh! If I had known she wanted you, I would not have asked.'

This was aggravating, but I could not let him run

away with the idea that mother had been detaining me all this time.

'She did not want me,' I replied, in an off-hand manner. 'We hardly spoke two words. I was sitting by the fire, thinking.'

'I am sure I wish I had been privileged to do the same' was the answer. He would not see that I considered myself aggrieved by anything, probably because he had nothing to accuse himself of. But I felt such complacency to be offensive. I must discourage it. He took it too much for granted that I was always ready to give an account of myself—that he had a right to ask for that account. If he were very much in love with me he would not be so calm and undisturbed. He never hardly called me by any more affectionate name than 'dear;' I tried to make that into an offence, obstinately refusing to own what I perfectly well knew—that when that quiet endearment fell from his lips it meant more than the most imbecile *tendresses* of a shallower nature.

'Oh, there was no reason why you should not have come,' said I. 'Mother likes talking to you, but—Alizon was with you, and as she and you always seem to get on so well together, I saw no reason to hurry back. "Two are company, but three are not," you know.'

'What do you mean, Betty? Surely you don't feel Alizon in the way! When we are so happy you could not like to leave her alone—and she so patient, and with so little pleasure!'

He looked so astonished that I endeavoured to mend matters by saying, with a laugh which was meant to be indifferent, but which only turned out awkward—

'You quite misunderstand. Martin's letter evidently caused you both very much amusement. It didn't amuse me, but as I dislike to be a restraint upon any innocent pleasure, I left you to amuse yourselves as you liked.'

It was with difficulty that I restrained an angry sob as I brought my remarks to a close. Pride, however, served me—it may be well, it may be ill. I bit my lips till they nearly bled, and managed to maintain my composure.

There was a pause—so long a pause that I grew very uncomfortable. Then he said in a pained and constrained tone—

‘Then you thought we were ridiculing Martin, and you by implication. I am sorry you have no higher opinion of my sincerity and loyalty.’

He could scarcely have hit upon more cutting words. I felt all too keenly what motives I had been implying to the two people whom I loved best in the world.

‘It’s of no use,’ I said obstinately. ‘You were amused at the letter, or why did you laugh, and tell Alizon that she must hear it? And why did she smile in that horrid sarcastic way all the time? It was unkind. Martin may amuse you, but he does not amuse me at all. I believe he is wretched, and I won’t laugh at him.’

This time I could not restrain a short sob.

‘Betty, I think even you must own that that letter was a vain, egotistic production. Martin fancies himself the centre of the universe. But if I have hurt your feelings in the least I beg your pardon—I will not laugh at his foibles again. I daresay I have been mistaken—he used to annoy me—I have not done him justice. So that is all about it, my love. Kiss and be friends.’

I was going to do no such thing. Nothing so sensible and reasonable should satisfy me. If Martin had known how miserable I was making myself—how I was disputing with my lover for a shadow, knowing him to be in the right—he, Martin, would surely have been satisfied. Without reflecting that Hugh had already humbled himself, and made an apology, when in reason it should have been I that did so, without

considering that to Hugh Extwistle's manly mind Martin's pompous, egotistic rhodomontade must have appeared both weak and ludicrous, I decided that I would not be disposed of in that off-hand manner—I would not be soothed by a kiss and a caressing word, as a child might be soothed by having a coral and bells jingled before its eyes—I would show that I was a reasonable being—a young woman arrived at years of discretion—not a baby. It was, however, not very courageously that I said, evading his offered kiss, and trying, but unsuccessfully, to remove his arm—

‘I think that when you and Alizon have so much to talk about, I am often in the way. I cannot bear to go where I am not wanted, and——’

At last I was completely successful in my attempt to escape; he unclasped his arm voluntarily, and stood before me with a flushed face, astonishment and almost consternation in his expression.

‘Betty,’ he said, decidedly, though quite kindly, ‘unsay what you have said just now; tell me it was a joke—though I hadn’t thought you could make such an unkind one—say you did not mean it.’

I raised my eyes to his face. Perhaps if he had looked pleading or beseeching I might in a manner have complied. As it was I saw nothing but a direct stern gaze, which uncompromisingly bade me unsay my words. Throwing my head back, I folded my hands before me, and said—

‘Why should I unsay them? You have neither denied nor disproved them. How do I know that you can?’

‘Do you wish me to understand that you think I am too attentive to her! Are you jealous, Betty?’ he asked, incredulously.

Silence on my part.

‘You surely cannot mean anything so humiliating to both of us. I—why you have promised to be my wife

—how can you keep that promise if you think I prefer your sister to you?’

This was certainly calling a spade a spade, and my heart almost seemed to stand still with fear. This quarrel was beginning to be hideously dangerous—unless I yielded at once and completely, and I was not ready to do that yet.

‘Tell me you do not mean that, dearest,’ said he, taking my passive hand. I looked down, and saw the sapphires in the ring he had given me. They mean steadfastness, truth ; and my heart ached cruelly.

‘But he has not denied it,’ whispered my evil genius. ‘Are you to say and unsay things just as he bids you, without rhyme or reason?’ I shook my head, with imbecile determination, answering—

‘You have not denied—why should I?’

‘I cannot condescend to assert or deny anything on this topic, Betty, except to say that you are completely in the wrong, and you must own it or—but you know what I mean. I must have every scrap of your faith and love, or none at all.’

I had a miserable satisfaction in knowing that my eyes were devoid of the semblance of a tear, and that I could meet his yearning glance—for he did plead now—without wavering or softening in the least. A few seconds, which seemed like centuries, were consumed in this mutual gaze ; and then I raised my head still higher, and still higher, and turned proudly and silently away. Let it be good-bye, if he liked ! I should be free and unvanquished. Let him go ! I should have proved that I had a will of my own, and was not to be bullied. But if he did—no ; he would not go !

He looked at me for a moment or two, and then, in a voice that I hardly recognised, said ‘Good-night,’ and moved towards the door.

How, I knew not, but I found myself at his side, my hand upon his, arresting it, as he turned the door handle, and I was saying—

'Don't go! Don't leave me! What shall I say? Tell me and I'll say it—anything you like, only don't go! Oh, Hugh, stay with me!'

By this time I had succeeded in removing his hand from the door handle, and to my intense, unspeakable relief he made no effort to replace it. I held it fast, and kissed it, afraid to let it go, crying very bitterly the while till he made an independent use of it, took my chin in it, and turned my face up, so that I had to look at him. I had never seen him look like that before—with so pale a face, so stern and so sad an expression.

'It is of no use for you to say what I tell you, unless you believe it,' said he, in the same changed voice. 'You have cut me to the heart, child!'

Now that I had given way I was terrified to see the height and depth of the precipice towards which I had been so insanely hurrying.

'Can you ever forgive me?' I breathed. 'It was a most awful mistake, but, oh, Hugh! it was because I loved you so!'

'Was it?' said he, kissing me at last, so that I began to breathe more freely again, and wished aloud, and very fervently, that I had never allowed myself to utter my imbecile jealousy.

'Thank heaven you did utter it. If you were not almost quicker to speak your thoughts than you are to think them—what might not have happened?'

Thus ended our only attempt at a quarrel. It left remembrances too unpleasant for me to wish ever to engage in such another encounter, although Hugh did try to make light of it, and said that

'The falling out of faithful friends
Renewal is of love.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

OCTOBER, November, December followed, one upon another, and we—I, at least—gradually got used to the new order of things, even to Alizon's blindness—but I could never get used to the drooping look, the mirthless smile, the listless indifference, with which she saluted each fresh day.

She would not complain, would not own to being unhappy, and I was sure that had I dared to approach the subject of Mr. Labatt, she would have refused with trenchant decision to own that she had acted in anything but the right way in that matter. Yet grief or love or sorrow, or all, were eating her heart away, even then.

Such was the state of things at Christmas. Our family circle was enlarged by the presence of Robin, whose ship had arrived in Liverpool from San Francisco a week before, and of Deb and her husband, who had come to spend the 'festive' season with us.

Two days before Christmas we all—except Alizon—went to a party—a dance—which Mrs. Entwistle gave in my honour. Until the moment in which Hugh led me to the top of the long, low drawing-room, to open the ball with him in a solemn quadrille, it had never occurred to me to feel nervous; but when I saw the room nearly full of people, and recognised that the chief part of them were looking critically at me, my courage did not rise to the occasion. I nervously begged Hugh to make a few mistakes, as I was sure my performance

would be one long blunder, and I trembled to think of it.

'That is a pity' was the reassuring reply. 'I know for a fact that old Mrs. Crossley thinks a great deal of deportment, and if you make any mistakes, she will not send us a mustard pot when we are married.'

'A mustard pot!'

'Even so! She always gives mustard pots for wedding presents—very nice mustard pots too—none of your electro-plate; so do try to make no mistakes.'

I began to laugh, and with the dread eye of the above-mentioned Mrs. Crossley fixed full upon me, had a horrible conviction that I could not stop, and that every one must be wondering what Entwistle could have seen to admire in that giggling girl.

'What do you think of Hectorina?' said Hugh.

'I think she looks lovely. But she said she only came to see you once in three years, and she was here only——'

'She is here because she is engaged to be married. Can you guess to whom?'

'Not to Ralph?'

'How could you guess? Did any one tell you?'

'No one, but when she was over here last, I was sure that if ever Ralph was engaged it would be to her.'

'Well, it is.'

'I am very glad of it,' said I, and though I was engaged to Hugh myself, I felt a little sense of exultation in the fact that my sister Alizon in her time had been asked by three such 'braw gentlemen' as Ralph Bamford, Hugh Entwistle, and Reginald Labatt to share their fortunes and rule their lives. I was at least glad she had declined in one case. I looked around for Sydney, but she was not there. When I asked Ralph how it was, he looked rather awkward, and said she was 'awfully sorry, you know, but at the very last minute

something detained her, and—a—may I have the pleasure of this waltz, Betty?

It was Christmas Eve—the day after the ball.

‘Are we all here?’ asked some one of our party, as we sat in the drawing-room in the evening.

‘Every one,’ answered mother, looking around. ‘I can see you all, though there is only firelight to do it by.’

‘And Hugh and Robert as well,’ observed Johnny, reflectively.

‘Suppose you sing something, Deb,’ said her husband; ‘some old song, fit for Christmas.’ And he looked complacently round, as who should say, ‘I am a man of happy ideas—don’t you think so?’

Deb looked round.

‘Well, join in the chorus,’ she said, and without further preliminary, began—

‘Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min’.

We were all taken by surprise, and only Hugh, Fanny, and Robin joined in the chorus.

‘Rather a dangerous experiment,’ murmured Hugh, in my ear. ‘If Deb sings like that I shall break down. I always cry at old songs like that.’

‘Robert is crying,’ said I, between tears and smiles myself, ‘and Saxon too.’

‘We twa hae paidl’t i’ the burn,
Frae mornin’ sun till dine :
But seas between us braid hae roar’d,
Sin’ auld lang syne.’

Hugh was silent, and when Deb began the last verse he touched my hand. Following his eyes, I looked to the distant window and saw Alizon. Shocked at our thoughtlessness, for to her what exquisite anguish must this song bring, I was about to rise, but he detained me.

Her head sank down, down, even lower and lower, into her hands, and I saw her shoulders rise and fall once or twice with a long, sobbing breath. But she would not give way—and now she was no longer alone. Some one stole to her from his place near her; it was Johnny; he sat on the window seat beside her, put his arm round her neck, and his rosy cheek touched her pale and worn face. Her attitude changed; her arm too stole round his neck; they kissed each other softly. Alizon was no longer out in the cold, though her voice did not join in the last—

‘We’ll tak a cup o’ kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.’

CHAPTER XXXIV

'I think, Betty,' said Alizon, on Christmas afternoon, 'that I should like to go to church.'

'Then you shall. I am going, and Hugh promised to meet me there.'

Bentfoot Church at Christmas was cold enough, and looked bare and frigid enough, but I always loved it. In the course of a few months, if all happened as we had planned, I should be married there. 'Next Christmas, Leverhouse would be shorn of one more of its lasses,' said Hugh, and wondered how long the others would be allowed to remain there. Hugh met us at the church, where we formed the chief part of the scanty congregation. The opening hymn on this as on other occasions was, 'Brightly gleams our banner;' and on this occasion we three—Alizon, Hugh, and I—could all sing it without one feeling of unkindness or half-heartedness. We felt it so, and did not miss a line.

The church was over. Farewell, little church on the moorside! Never again should we three enter these walls in just the same state as we then left them.

The spare congregation, blue and cold, dispersed itself in scanty knots and streamlets over the churchyard. We were the last to go out—only two or three loiterers were left about; the day was already growing dim.

But who was that, standing tall, alone, and apart, and gazing abstractedly at the inscription on my favourite tombstone? I felt a shock of surprise as I

saw that figure. He was not there by accident. Sydney's absence from the ball the other night, and Ralph's embarrassment, were explained, for that could be no other than Sydney's guest. I was, however, determined that Alizon should not be taken by surprise. To this end I arrested her in the porch, on the pretext of arranging her scarf, and I then succeeded, after making sundry grimaces and whispering a whisper, in letting Hugh know that he was to go and speak to the solitary figure in the long, heavy overcoat. No sooner had he gone than I said, unceremoniously, while I retied her scarf—

'Alizon, do you know that Mr. Labatt is in the churchyard? I feel sure he is waiting for you.'

My words had their full effect. Her face turned to the hue of a deep-toned rose, and then became pale again. Her voice trembled with surprise, and, I believed, with delight, as she answered—

'Mr. Labatt? You—you must be mistaken!'

'Not at all. He is coming up to us now. Hugh is bringing him.'

All her philosophy did not enable her to look cool, self-possessed, or dignified, when he spoke to her. I felt triumphant. I felt sure Bentfoot Church was my lucky-house. I had a sensation of being extremely discerning when I saw the eager look which Mr. Labatt fastened upon Alizon's face. Three months' separation had not reconciled him—they had only taught him more fully what she was to him.

It was nearly dark when we left the churchyard. Alizon turned inquiringly, seeking her usual guide—my hand, or Hugh's arm.

'Alizon,' said Mr. Labatt, almost timidly, 'if you would take my arm—will you?'

Without a word she put her hand within his arm, and we took our way home through the fields, Hugh and I walking somewhat in advance of the others.

Mr. Labatt accepted my invitation—when Alizon's

had been joined to it—to stay and drink tea with us. Leaving him to mother, and Hugh to my brothers to entertain, Alizon and I went upstairs. Instead of sitting down in her usual phlegmatic, listless manner, she began to pace to and fro restlessly; the look of pain and indecision upon her face ever increasing. She turned now and then towards the dressing-table where I stood, as if she would speak, but each time she stopped before the words were uttered.

‘Oh, Betty!’ she at last burst forth, ‘if you could tell me what is right!’

‘Perhaps I can. Is it something about Mr. Labatt?’

‘Oh yes! He says it is of no use. He loves me more than ever. He had been that Sunday afternoon, you know—to tell mother so and to ask her consent to his proposing—and she had given it. He has seen her again this afternoon, and she wishes it too. He—can you believe it, Betty?’

‘Very well indeed.’

‘He begs me to be his wife. He says he loves me better for this blindness—he says that since he turned me towards the storm that day, and that accident happened, that I am his—he says—oh, he says a great deal, which I am sure I have no right to listen to.’

‘And you, Alizon—you love him?’

‘If I love him!’ she said, with a short laugh. ‘I would rather have been blinded by his hand than crowned by any other. I don’t know what you may feel with Hugh, but when I am with him I feel in a different atmosphere—as different from my ordinary life as a Beethoven Symphony is from a comic song. That’s what I feel for him.’

Deciding rapidly that I did not feel at all like that with Hugh, and that I should be dreadfully frightened of him if I did, but quite sure that it was the correct thing for people like Alizon and Mr. Labatt to feel, I said, decisively—

‘You feel so, Alizon? That is the love that we

hear of in poetry—the highest. 'I knew your time would come some time, for all your scoffings. I don't know what you see in him to love him so, but since it is so, why, accept him. You will do very wrong if you don't.'

'If it should be bad for him—blind—a clog upon him—a burden!'

I put my hands upon her shoulders, and said, emphatically—

'Say, "yes," Alizon! Remember, his life is not so bright but you can gladden it. Ah, if you could see his eyes when he looks at you!'

'There, that will do!' said she, abruptly. 'Is my hair straight?'

Taking the hint, I lovingly arranged her bright brown hair, and took her downstairs. In the firelight of the drawing-room I dimly discerned two figures—one that of Mr. Labatt, the other that of my brother Johnny, as I found by his voice, which said—

'Here's another—why is a piece of toffy like a racehorse?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Mr. Labatt, politely.

'Because the more you lick it the faster it goes' was the disgusting answer. 'Isn't it a good one?'

Thinking that Alizon, if allowed, might perhaps give her decision at once, I beckoned Johnny away and left the others alone, while he and I with light hearts joined our relatives and friends in a spirited game of battledore and shuttlecock in the schoolroom until tea-time, when, in going to the dining-room, our procession, consisting of myself and Hugh, arm-in-arm with Fanny, Clara, and the younger boys mincing behind us in a manner which they thought proper to assume whenever they saw us together, met another procession—a very short one, consisting of mother, Alizon, and Mr. Labatt.

'Betty,' whispered Hugh, 'it's all right!' Subsequent events proved this guess to be perfectly correct.

Since that Christmas evening our family has been broken up and divided.

Alizon and I were both married at Bentfoot Church one spring morning, and now she lives at Haythorpe, a sadder and a sweeter woman than she once was, despite her beauty and her wit.

Robin still sails the stormy ocean. Deb lives on contentedly in her southern home, as I do with Hugh at Ormerod. Kindly Mrs. Entwistle has been gathered to her rest; our dear Sydney has abdicated her place at Foss-house to make room for Hectorina, who, sweet though she may be, dear friend though she undoubtedly is, does not fill the place of mistress, friend, and hostess of that hospitable mansion as Sydney once did.

'And the two Leverhouse lasses who yet remain there,' observes Hugh, at this juncture, 'are being much better brought up than their elder sisters, with a governess and masters, and everything correct.'

'I only know this,' said I, wrathfully. 'Fanny and Clara are much too old—for their age. They are not half as nice as we were, with all our faults.'

'So I think,' says he, deprecatingly.

THE END

